Hilma

William Tillinghast Eldridge

Merry Xmas.
From Rena.

HILMA

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She stopped, and plucking a deep red rose, pressed it to her lips. p. 81

HILMA

By

WILLIAM TILLINGHAST ELDRIDGE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

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To my
Mother and Father

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She stopped, and plucking a deep red rose, pressed it to her lips. *Frontispiece*

"Look," I exclaimed, . . . "do you see that woman there?" *facing page* 20

I brought tactics learned on the football field into play " " 276

I thrust the top bolt home, the second, then the third. " " 286

HILMA

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF STRANGE EVENTS

When I turn and look back on those few weeks, I am bound to ask myself how it all could have occurred. Surprise followed surprise. I was picked up, apparently, and carried along into, perhaps, as exciting a series of events as man ever encountered. As I now write, I can picture a quiet little city, quaint and old, truly of the Old World, and yet in many ways so modern. The Lake of Wertzer sparkles clear to my mind as it did the morning when first I saw it, and then black and cold as on that fateful night so long ago.

The picture, however, always gives way to the thought of the strange fate which placed me, a private gentleman, in the rush and fuss that attended the crowning of the ruler of Scarvania.

From utter lack of knowledge that such a country existed, I suddenly found myself possessed of full knowledge, not only of its existence but of its most hidden secrets. And more than that, I became the companion, the helper, the adviser at secret councils. For a brief day I wondered at my place. Meeting with lords and dukes, the confidant of her, the companion of brave Karl von Merlder, the adviser of gruff old Kurlmurt.

Was it not natural that at first I felt I was in strange company? Then I ceased to wonder. Perhaps events crowded in too quickly. However that may be, I know I soon found myself playing a part, fighting a fight, as if I always had, and now I shut my eyes and glory in it as in some fair dream.

I thank Fate I had my turn upon that stage, and though the pang is there I have recompense for every heartache. It was all to have met her and helped to do what was done. And then there is a thought of something that may yet transpire.

At the very start I give full credit to my sister Polly for my meeting with Karl von Merlder. She did not of course introduce me to him, and yet had she not insisted upon my going with her and Frank to Rhinecliff that spring, I should never have fallen in with him as I did. So, I extend to her the honour of having started me on the road to doing something, an act she claimed I had never been guilty of before.

I had refused to be one of my sister's house party. Instead, I had gone West for a good long hunting trip. An old friend had written me about the time Polly made her plans, and I accepted his invitation in preference to hers.

Three months in the woods, loafing when you will, tramping when you feel so inclined and, above all, sleeping out under the sky, or sitting over a good camp fire with a black brier, is apt to make one's fondness for trains, their dirt and dust anything but strong.

It was, therefore, a relief to find myself in the Pullman on the last stage of my journey back to New York. I

had found a pile of mail at the Auditorium, but two hours had passed since leaving Chicago before I opened a letter.

Someway, I did not feel in the mood to take up my correspondence, so, instead, went through a pile of newspapers and a few magazines.

As I finished the last paper, my gaze, which for ten minutes had wandered from the article I was reading, fell upon one of my fellow-passengers seated directly across the aisle.

His forehead was wrinkled in mute perplexity, and for some time I watched him, or at least was conscious that he was there before me, apparently studying hard over some knotty problem and all the time pulling at his moustache as if he would have it out by the roots.

Finally I threw down my paper and, turning to my mail, began to open the letters.

It is, presumably, pleasing to know that one or two investments have turned out handsomely, and yet I fear I accorded my banker's letter little more than a grunt and a very hasty perusal.

At last I ran through the pile and found my more personal correspondence. A thick envelope addressed in a bold hand to "John Harold Converse" clearly indicated my sister, and I seized upon it as an oasis in a desert of inane letters.

I knew that Polly would, at least, write interestingly, if possibly uncomplimentarily, and as I opened the thick sheets I began to take a real interest in home events. The letter was of undue length, written at different times, and told me a great deal, even if a bit disconnected.

Many things I think at the beginning of this tale can be best explained by the letter itself, so I have copied it as received, minus one or two small parts which discretion bids me eliminate.

The letter ran as follows:

"New York, June 1, 1905.

"My dear John: If this letter ever reaches you, I suppose one should first offer congratulations upon your having escaped the lions and wolves. You know I was very sure you would be eaten alive and, in fact, expressed the hope that such would be your fate. Of course you went away on a nasty hunting trip when Frank and I felt you should have come to us, and that, I confess, prompted the desire.

"Time, however, has softened your sister's heart, and although you have always been just as unaccommodating, I do forgive you. So now come back to us at once, for really I feel the need of you as a safety valve. Frank himself told me last night that he hoped you would turn up soon, so he could have an acceptable subject for mild oaths. You know I allow Frank to swear only at you. So do come back to us, John, and I'll promise not to force Alice Bessling on you again for two months. In fact, John, Alice has turned out far worse than I had believed the girl capable of doing.

"She went with us to Rhinecliff, as you know, and so too did Sir Charles Bander—you've heard of him—while you went shooting instead of coming along as I wished. Sir Charles with a clear field has, I fear, won Alice's heart. None of the other men seemed able to stop the international outrage. If you'd been there, John!

"Think of it! You look so well on all occasions. I know Sir Charles could never have stood up for one moment against your strong points. You know you're

handsome, John, quite strongly so." [Spare my modesty.]

"Of course, if one takes you apart, your nose is too large; then your chin is far too determined from a woman's standpoint, unless she's slight, blond and has light blue eyes. Your eyes, John, are a beautiful deep brown, but then they snap at times really too severely. Still, the whole is good, and Alice was never, if anything, a vivisector." [This, really, thought I, was in Polly's best style. She would tell you most sweetly your good points and then calmly show you they had no real grace at all.]

"So if you had only gone in for sweet Alice instead of the wolves and bears! But there it is. I suggested Rhinecliff and Alice, and you, of course, in your contrariness at once bolted for Montana.

"Do you know, it's hard to realise the fastidious John roughing it? Frank says you can sleep in your clothes, shoes and all, like a Turk. I can't fancy it. And now about this time you're coming home. If you start when your last letter said, you'll find this, over a week old, at the Auditorium.

"I fear Alice has gone over to the English, though the dear girl won't make me her father confessor. If it's true I shall look about for some one else. There's really an advantage in hunting a wife for you, for money doesn't matter. You are so rich, I feel you must marry some poor creature. I'll try to find one. (Luncheon—more later.)

"Everybody is so well I am unable to dwell on new diseases. Things go with Frank just the same. Jimmie Van Burve tried that horse you sold him once too often, and now Jimmie goes about in a motor. His knee is getting better, but I really fear he'll be lame for life. Don't say Jimmie can't ride. You know the horse was a brute.

"Frank is crazy over his car, or cars I'd better say,

for now he's got at least six. Two don't count, he claims, for they're small ones. I'm going to wake up later on, I suppose, and find myself a widow, for Frank is such a reckless driver. At least, John, I'll try to be an attractive one. (Another stop. Alice has just run up the steps.)

"Later! Extra! Alice *is* going to marry Sir Charles. Now you've missed it, for Alice *is* a sweet creature and she'd have made you a most excellent counterbalance. I can't tell you a whole lot, for Alice doesn't know a thing herself, except she's going to be married at once. Think of it! No chance for anything. Sir Charlie has got some wee mite of a place down in Europe. It's a diplomatic position and one that just suits him down to the ground. He says—through Alice—that he shan't have anything to do as it's only a 'piper' of a kingdom. Thus he can hunt, ride, and read all he likes. I'll venture you he put on another occupation when he told Alice, and it began with an 'l.'

"But think of it, John. Alice will be married before you can get here. Now don't say you don't care a hang, for you know you love her. But you'll never see her again, I fear, for they leave at once for Scarvania, and where that is I don't know, so there's no telling *when* she'll come back.

"Now come to us at once. I've got to fix Alice up for this wedding as best I can on short notice, and so can tell you nothing more than I've got my hands completely full.

"Now do come. You know I love you as much as I abuse you. If I could catch you on the wire I'd have you here for the wedding, of course. Perhaps Sir Charles would let you be B. M. It would be a fitting punishment for letting such a dear girl slip through your fingers.

"Sister.
"Polly.

"P.S. Alice just in. She reports Scarvania a delightful spot, according to Sir C. That he has spent a good deal of his time there the last three years, and recalls, as a convincing argument in its favour, that we, Alice and I, met a Scarvanian princess a few years ago in London. I remember the girl, and I will admit, if she is an example, the country's not so terrible. Yet it's no excuse for his taking Alice so far away.

"Sister P."

The letter set me thinking. Alice Bessling married, undoubtedly, considering the date of Polly's letter, and now beyond question on her way to—well, to some bit of a far-off country, the name of which no one could be expected to remember. At least one thing was certain, no more could interfering Polly lay traps with sweet Alice as the bait. I had liked the girl—liked her immensely—but because of that saw no good reason why I should marry her. The news, however, was surprising, for while I had heard of Sir Charles, I had never for a moment thought of his marrying my old playmate.

As I sat considering what had come of my hunting trip—though I had no thought it would have been different had I not gone—my eyes wandered over the car in silent contemplation of my fellow-passengers.

There were very few worthy of note, hardly one to whom you would give a second consideration, except a very striking girl, two seats beyond on my side of the car.

A pretty woman Polly had always contended was an attractive point of interest to me. I am quite sure had she been with me she would have stored away the incident to prove her claim, for I surveyed my fair travelling

companion with more than ordinary interest. But she wasn't present and what was I to do? Be human, I fear, and nothing more or less.

Maid, widow or wife? I mused as I leaned back in my chair and made a careful inspection of the lady's profile. Certainly not wife. I made up my mind at once on that point. Just why, however, it would have been hard for me to explain. If not wife, then not widow. And if neither, then certainly maid.

It was so easily determined I couldn't for the life of me think why there had been any doubt. As to age, I was bound to say she was about thirty. Perhaps two years under that possible age, but certainly not over it.

I nodded my head in agreement with my decision, and then quickly shifted my gaze as the object of my scrutiny looked up. Her look said plainly she was fully aware she had been under observation and, moreover, her expression did not seem to resent the fact.

Not so satisfactory, I thought, as I stuck my nose deep into a magazine, which I suddenly discovered to be upside down. As I turned it over I could almost have sworn a faint smile appeared for an instant at the corners of her mouth. Driven from the consideration of one passenger, I turned to a consideration of my blond neighbour, having found the magazine uninteresting, upside down or otherwise.

"A decent-looking fellow," agreed I, "if only he would leave that moustache alone." Moustaches were hardly my specialty, and certainly not when frequently caressed.

"Foreign I should say," I summed up my second examination. "A German and rather a clever chap."

The square forehead, the deep-set eyes and the firm lips, that met tightly, were all good points in man or dog.

Suddenly he left off pulling his moustache, and turning in his chair, picked up a small hand bag from the floor. Out of this he took several packages of papers and began to examine them with great care and deliberation.

I was about to turn to my magazine, when the fair stranger who had first attracted my attention moved quickly across the aisle and dropped into the seat next the German-looking chap. As she did so she carefully turned her back toward him.

The move was made so deliberately that I pricked up my ears. There was a purpose in it beyond a doubt, and I fell to studying the magazine with one eye on the two opposite.

The man had turned a bit from the woman and was busy poring over the documents in his hand, while the bag rested on his knees.

For a moment or two the woman seemed to take no interest in the one at her side. Then she moved her chair slowly on its pivot, and to all appearance continued reading the newspaper in her hand. Yet, beyond any manner of doubt, she was striving to look over the papers the other was examining.

My eyebrows went up in astonishment. It was risking a great deal to attempt so publicly to scrutinise what the other was looking over, but apparently no one in the car except myself had noticed even the change in seats.

I am frank to say curiosity got the better of me and I watched the two across the aisle with more than ordinary interest.

Several times as I turned hastily to my paper I caught a quick glance on the woman's part about the car, as if to see whether any one had observed her actions.

Fortune certainly favoured her. Several had left for the diner, and the remaining few were either asleep or busy reading. Apparently no one was paying the slightest attention to the two.

Just after the woman had taken her last glance about the car and moved forward carefully in her seat, the man fell again to pulling his moustache as he balanced a last package of papers in his hand.

In the pause, while he considered the documents as if weighing them carefully and the woman sat watching them, a flush of excitement on her face, as though she would like to reach forward and seize the package, I attempted to place the strange occurrence in its proper light.

Certainly these two did not know each other. The woman seemed, however, to be deeply concerned in all the man did, yet the man had no apparent idea that he or his papers were an object of interest to any one. It was beyond me to explain the thing as I viewed it then, particularly as I again noted the refined appearance of the woman. She was dark, rather of a Spanish type. Her lips, full and red, were parted in eager expectation as her dark, snapping eyes watched the man at her side.

Her bosom rose and fell with deep breaths as she sat, every nerve at full tension, leaning forward, a paper before her face, but her eyes fastened on the package balanced almost carelessly in the man's right hand.

Then suddenly, as if to break the spell, the man pulled

back the different folded sheets under the elastic band, examined each title carefully, nodded and dropped them into the pocket of his coat. As he did so he snapped his bag together and placed it on the floor at his side.

Then falling again into his habit of stroking his moustache, he pulled a cigar from his pocket and, rising, passed down the aisle.

I almost laughed aloud at the woman's look of disappointment. Apparently she had expected him to open the sheets and give her a chance to read or make some note of their contents.

My interest prompted me to go to the diner while the two were separated, as I verily believed other developments were bound to follow. If they did I meant to be present, and in that resolve plead guilty to as great an act of curiosity as that for which any woman was ever scoffed at by my sex.

I hastened to remove a part of the soil of travel and then came back into the car on my way to the diner. As I rounded the compartment at the end I stopped, dumbfounded. There was the woman bending over the bag the man had had in his lap. It was open, apparently, and from where I stood there was no question but that she was looking over its contents, although I could not see her actual movements on account of her position.

For an instant I stood motionless and then, clearing my throat, stepped forward toward my chair. At my cough the woman started and rose instantly. There was a click as if the bag had been snapped together, and then, with a rare smile, she turned and faced me.

"I've dropped my ring," she explained in a rich musi-

cal voice. "Can you see it?" She motioned toward the floor between the chairs.

For an instant I was nonplussed. There she stood, smiling, confident and innocent. Had I been mistaken? It was puzzling, but I bowed and, dropping to my knees, peered under the seat.

A flash caught my eye and my hand closed over a seal ring of most strange pattern and rare stones. Certainly I had done the woman an injustice. She might have displayed unwarranted interest in the man's papers, but beyond all manner of doubt she had dropped her ring, for here it was resting in my hand.

I gave it to her, feeling that I had done her a wrong. She thanked me prettily, almost letting her fingers caress my hand as she took back her jewel, and then with the picture of her dark, handsome eyes before me I moved on toward the diner.

Now I can see the look those eyes must have shot after me as I passed from the car. She was an actress well worthy of the best hand, yet I am sure her feeling of elation at having tricked me was allowed to show for an instant in her dark eyes.

Still how little she reckoned on what she had done. It was a clever move to toss her ring under the seat, if any one had come upon her as I did. But it is always these clever tricks that come back upon the perpetrators when least expected. So it was with the ring, for as I gave it to her I marked its strange workmanship, and that glance served me well erelong.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITH THE BLOND MOUSTACHE

My expectations were not fulfilled during the rest of the trip, as the woman failed to display any further interest in the other.

When we reached the Grand Central I hurried down the platform, an attending porter carrying my bag and gun case.

I was about to pass through the gate when a commotion behind me attracted my attention, and in another moment the German clutched me by the arm, ejaculating excitedly:

"You have it, my bag. There! It was given you by him. This is not mine!"

I followed his excited gesture to discover that my porter had secured his bag instead of mine. With an explanation the change in property was accomplished, and I turned toward the Concourse, slightly amused at the incident.

In a half hour I was deposited before my sister's house, and with a bound had mounted the steps and was pressing the bell.

The door swung open to the familiar face of Robbins, and once again I was at home, or, rather, at the only home I had known for the last ten years.

"Well, Robbins, home again. Every one well?" I demanded cheerily.

The butler's greeting was more than cordial.

"Welcome back, Mr. Converse," he said. "Yes, every one as is here is quite well, though there ain't no one here now, sir."

"No one here! What do you mean?" I demanded as Robbins relieved me of my hat and coat.

"Why, sir, they're gone, sir. Mr. and Mrs. Woodbright sailed last Saturday, sir. Very suddenly, sir. I have a letter for you."

"Sailed!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "You don't mean my sister and her husband aren't here?"

"That's it, sir. They're gone, sir. The house was to be kept open until you had returned and decided what you would do. Here's a letter, sir," and Robbins handed over the note in question.

"But I thought they were to spend at least a month in the city, Robbins," I protested. He shook his head as if to admit that it was beyond him to explain, and so I turned to my sister's note.

"A very sudden departure for Europe" (it ran). "Frank and I have decided to go for a motor trip in Germany, and as Sir Charles and Alice are sailing the coming Saturday, the seventh, we shall pack helter-skelter and be off with them. I did hope you would get here before we left, for then you could have come with us. Frank had your passage booked, but has changed it for next week. Therefore, John dear, you are to sail on the fourteenth and catch up with us in London. We'll go to the Carlton.

"We want you for that motor trip. You know we've talked of it often and you must come. You'll enjoy yourself, for I know nary a soul in

Germany, and so cannot impose any 'faire ladie' on you.

"It is, perhaps, cruel to the bride and groom, but Sir C. and Alice are hardly the spooney kind.

"You sail, no excuse, on the fourteenth.

"POLLY.

"P.S. Robbins will tell you the rest."

As I finished the note I whistled softly. Robbins nodded in complete agreement.

For perhaps a moment or two I stood there in the hall, staring vacantly about me. Somehow I had counted on finding the house full, and certainly I had not expected a trip to Europe staring me in the face. Finally I shrugged my shoulders.

"I'll go to my room, Robbins," I said, "have a bath and then some luncheon. You had better attend me and give me the facts Mrs. Woodbright has neglected."

The facts were about as Polly's letter indicated. Robbins was able to detail an account of Alice Bessling's wedding and the sudden departure of my sister and her husband, but beyond that there was little additional information to be secured. The house was to be closed as soon as I left for Europe, apparently a foregone conclusion on Polly's part, or if I failed to go, a contingency Robbins freely admitted as not expected, it was to be kept open until I decided to go to the Club.

"On Mrs. Woodbright's instructions, sir, I've packed all your things, sir, and sent your trunks to the pier."

I looked up in astonishment.

"Mrs. Woodbright evidently expected I would sail," I ventured.

"She evidently *hoped* you would, sir."

"Yes, so I should judge," I agreed dryly.

"I've left your steamer trunk here, sir," Robbins explained, "so you could put what few things you wish in it. Mrs. Woodbright felt sure you'd like such an arrangement."

I nodded in complete understanding as I watched Robbins's placid face. I had no doubt that inwardly he was smiling, in fact almost chuckling. Here it was Friday noon, and I was expected to sail the next day for Europe. Well, one thing and only one thing was certain: I would sail if I so decided.

My personal affairs were in excellent hands, and outside of my personal affairs I had really nothing to detain me. At times, of course, I had been known to devote myself conscientiously to the scratch pad and turn out reams which some publishers were good enough to accept. At other times I had hardly touched pen to paper, much, I will admit, to my sister's disgust. Now I suddenly had an idea of finishing a novelette begun some two years before, and as its plot carried the characters to London and thence to the Continent, I decided I might as well make the trip planned by Polly and write from late personal knowledge of places described.

And thus it was settled on Friday, and on the next morning, with only the faithful Robbins to bid me *bon voyage*, I saw New York grow a speck on the horizon as the *Majestic* started on her seven days' trip.

The fact that Fate plays strange tricks is believed by me. Fate willed that Alice Bessling should marry Sir Charles and so take a small part in after events, and it

was Fate, too, that held me back in the woods until I should miss my sister and her husband and so sail on the *Majestic*, thus meeting again my blond neighbour of the Chicago train, good Karl von Merlder.

And, too, it was Fate, as it is Fate in all things, that kicked up a heavy sea no sooner had we dropped our pilot, thus reducing the active passenger list to a minimum figure. This threw Von Merlder and myself together that much the sooner and made us, by the closer companionship that followed, so much the quicker to know one another.

My seat aboard ship was at the captain's table, and at luncheon the first day out we had a good company. By night the heavy sea had got in its work and the number began to diminish.

Sunday night the storm was still raging, and on Monday morning I found myself the lone occupant of my table.

From a brief survey of the dining-rooms, which showed a very, very meagre attendance, I had turned to my breakfast—to start on the fruit and following down the whole list, an act which would have dealt pangs to less fortunate mortals—when I heard some one address me.

I turned to find my blond travelling companion at my elbow.

"If you will pardon me," he said, offering his card, "I am alone at my table. You are the same. If you have no objections I will sit here."

I nodded instantly, for I had liked the fellow's looks, and Count Karl von Merlder, my good companion in the

few following weeks, my good friend to-day, accepted my hand as I offered my card in return.

I recall that breakfast well, and the opinion I formed of him as we talked. He was a gentleman of rare education, and one who had evidently travelled extensively. He was young, possibly not over twenty-four, but of a quiet and far more mature manner than his years would indicate.

Beyond that I found him frank, a good companion and one who made you like him for the reason that you could not do otherwise. His laugh was hearty, his eye clear, sharp, but with a faint twinkle about it, while his whole bearing was as if he could do if the need came. After events showed well that this was most truly the case.

From breakfast that morning we combined forces in the smoking-room, and from that time on—he had his seat changed at the table—we were together almost continually.

The trip was thus made far shorter and, above all else, far more agreeable. In fact, I felt as the end came I had no wish for a parting, and yet from what I could gather of my friend's plans he was to hasten forward on his journey.

He said very little, if anything, of his trip to America until the last day of the voyage, and then he spoke generally and in a manner that considerably perplexed me.

We hoped to dock, I remember, at Liverpool early in the morning, and as we discussed the prospects of landing were tramping the promenade deck.

"If we don't strike a fog we will be in London early this evening," I remarked as we turned in our walk.

"Undoubtedly," he agreed; "they'll run a train, a special, and it will take us four hours, not more."

"And what then?" I asked with real interest. "Do you stop or go on? I should like to have you meet my sister and her husband, if you can."

"It would give me great pleasure, but—er—well, the facts are such I cannot say. But if I can— How long will you be in London?"

"That's hard for me to tell," I answered with a laugh. "My sister is not to be counted upon. But still you had better join us for dinner at least one evening—say Sunday. We will be at the Carlton, and if you will give me your address, my sister will write you."

Again he hesitated. He seemed anxious to accept my offer, and yet for some reason was loth to either accept or decline. At last he turned and spoke quickly, as if labouring under some excitement.

"You see, Converse, I am so situated that I cannot tell where I shall go when I reach England. I will not stop in London for a single hour more than I have to. My instructions are to push on to Sca—to my country as rapidly as I can, but to expect a letter or cable that may change my plans at any moment. I may have it at Liverpool, or I may get it in London. If I must stay in London, which I pray I shall not have to do, I will call upon you and then, if your sister will be so good, I——"

"I see," I broke in, endeavouring to relieve him from further explanations; "then let's leave it that way. We'll travel as far as London together, if you hear nothing when we land. Then if you stop in London, you'll call, as you say. In any event, let's hope we

may meet again later. Perhaps when your present mission is over we can renew this pleasant week's acquaintance somewhere in Europe. I'm going, by the way, into Germany with my sister and brother-in-law. It's to be a motor trip."

He shook his head.

"I should like to very much, but for several months I will be so very busy I shall be unable to get away. In fact," and he laughed bitterly, "I may, perhaps, have the pleasure of ending all my work abruptly."

"Then you'll be able to join us. I should be glad to have you do so," I said with great good will.

Again the shake of the head, with a sarcastic smile.

"If my work ends, I'll go nowhere but to Heaven or Hell."

The words were tinged with a great deal of bitterness, and so different from his usual tone that I looked at him in astonishment. His meaning was hardly clear.

He saw that some explanation was due me, so hastened to add:

"I mean that while my mission so far has been successful, it may not end so. If it does not, I am very likely to lose my life. The fact is, I'm playing in a quiet game, quite full of danger."

The statement was made in an off-hand way that I came later on to know well, and seemed to dismiss the matter as of no consequence.

Suddenly my liking for the fellow got the better of me.

"Well, I'd like to play the game with you, that's all I can say," I exclaimed.

"Look," I exclaimed, . . . "do you see that woman there?"

To my astonishment, he stopped, grasped my hand and affectionately wrung it.

"And I wish you could. A few like you, Converse, and we could win easily. One brave, loyal heart can do a lot when it adds itself to a small force fighting against heavy odds. If I could only take you with me, if—" and he again fell to pulling his moustache as he dropped my hand and hastily resumed his walk.

I took up my steps at his side, refraining from questions that might prove embarrassing, for I saw that he was troubled.

Finally he broke the silence.

"You will pardon me for not telling you more when I've said so much," he began impulsively. "If I had but my own self to consider, I would explain all. As it is, I must say nothing for fear of saying more than I should. You will pardon me. You will forgive my failure to explain?"

With a word I turned the talk into other channels, but though I spoke on several subjects, I saw he hardly heard me at all.

Finally we tramped the deck in silence.

We had passed up and down along the row of steamer chairs well filled with passengers for possibly the tenth time, when suddenly I caught sight of a figure at the far end of the deck.

"Look," I exclaimed, as my hand fell on his arm, "do you see that woman there?" He looked up sharply, and as he followed my discreet gesture the woman turned toward us. She was wrapped in a long coat and a heavy scarf partly concealed her face.

"No, I never saw the lady—yet—there is something very familiar—but I haven't the honour of her acquaintance."

"It's nothing," I replied; "I thought you might know her; she was on the train from Chicago."

He shook his head and was instantly lost in his own thoughts. As we again took up our silent promenade the woman turned out of sight.

Why I had thought it worth while to call her to his attention, and yet not tell him of the curiosity she had shown over his affairs, I cannot say. Nevertheless, I am satisfied it could have made little difference as things turned out. They were surely cast in a mould, and already the game was fairly started.

CHAPTER III

THE PAPERS CHANGE HANDS

We made better time than had been expected, and by noon had docked, passed the customs, a very light task in comparison to the requirements on the other side, and settled ourselves in a compartment of the special which waited for the boat.

As I saw the station fade away I turned to Von Merlder, and to my surprise found him puzzling over a long message. On his face was an expression of much perplexity.

"Bad news?" I asked.

He glanced up in a startled way. Undoubtedly my presence had been forgotten in the telegram before him.

He shook his head slowly as he turned back again to his message. "It is of this matter I have in hand, and they have bungled the code."

I nodded, and as he did not seem inclined to volunteer any further information, turned to the shifting landscape.

From this contemplation and the fragrance of my cigar I was suddenly brought back to my surroundings by hearing my companion address me.

I turned quickly at something in his tone, and found him silently regarding me with a questioning expression on his face. I had a feeling he had been making a study of my profile for some time.

"Well?" I demanded.

"I have felt I should tell you something more of my plans," he began slowly, drawing his chair close to mine, "for we have come in a short time to know each other so very well. Up to now, however, I have been unable. Even now I cannot tell you as much as I would, but because I am going to ask of you a favour, I must, I feel, tell you certain things."

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "I may have exhibited a bit of curiosity about you, but I assure you it was unintentional. As to your favour, let me hear what I can do and I'm ready. Don't feel that you must tell me anything."

"Aye, it is as I expected," he said, with a satisfied nod; "but still I must explain certain things. I am going to ask you to do something that is very simple, and yet some danger may be attached to it."

"Good," I declared, laughing lightly. "Have I got a gauntlet to run or a few deep-dyed villains to circumvent? If I have, so much the better. I can use fists, gun or rapier, as it suits your fancy."

I know I spoke jocosely, for I felt in such a mood. Truth to tell, Von Merlder's attitude was anything but jocular, and yet I made jest of the matter. I suppose it was my way.

He smiled at my words, taking no offence at this levity, but shook his head. "No rapiers or pistols in this, my friend, at least not in the part I ask you to take. But first let me tell you as much of my history as will enable you to understand why I ask this favour of you. I have been in the States after certain evidence. This I have secured. Now, however, I have a cable which changes

my plans and makes me fear grave dangers have arisen since I left my country. You see, there are certain ones who would not for the world have these documents I hold"—he tapped his coat—"reach my mistress. The instructions in this cable make it necessary for me to transfer them to another."

"But why," I demanded, "if they are so valuable? You have brought them thus far. I should think you could be trusted to go on with them."

"The reason for the order is not to be questioned by me," he replied in a settled way that left no doubt. "The facts are I am to turn them over to a second party, to be found at the Carlton at seven-fifteen this evening."

"But where, then, is the need of me?" I inquired.

"I cannot deliver the papers myself."

"In other words," I replied, coming to the point at once, "you want me to deliver a package of importance to a certain person."

"Yes."

"Very good. Give me the package and tell me the name of the person to whom it is to be delivered."

"It is always so to the point with an American."

"My dear fellow, it is a very simple matter."

"To you, yes. To me, no. It is honour, life, all that is sacred."

"Your honour?"

"Mine? No, my princess's, the honour of her house, the honour of my country. My honour is a small thing in comparison."

"I see. You have told me of the circumstances so that I will realise the importance of my task."

"And of the danger."

"Danger?" I demanded with a smile.

"I cannot deliver these affidavits myself. I cannot even trust them to the mail. So my instructions read. Therefore the danger must be great. We are evidently watched."

I nodded.

"You will be seen, most likely have been seen with me by now, and they will watch you as well as me. They may try to take the package from you."

"Indeed," I replied, feeling a bit that he was trying to impress me unduly with the importance of my part. "Give me the package and I'll deliver it."

"Aye," he answered, nodding his head slowly and looking me in the eye—"aye, I knew it. I thought of you at once, but I feared to trouble you."

"Trouble me? For Heaven's sake, man, where is the trouble? Give me the package and tell me to whom it is to go, and that's the end of it."

Again he nodded, turned to his message and read carefully, translating the code as he went on.

"Carlton grill, seven-fifteen, left-hand side, table with white carnations. Bearer wear same flower in coat. Give documents to lady. Password 'For her.'" He looked up as he stopped. "Those are your instructions, the rest is for me. You do not feel that I am imposing upon our short acquaintance?"

"My good fellow," I assured him, for truly he seemed to feel he was asking a great deal, "you wish me to set down certain documents at a table decorated with white carnations in the Carlton grill. The hour is convenient

and I shall be only too glad to serve you and your cause."

He protested no more, but in a business-like manner fetched out a package of papers and an envelope from his pocket, the same package he had balanced in his hand that day on the New York train. Slipping the papers into the envelope, he sealed the lap with some wax, and the imprint of his ring was a lion above two crossed swords.

As he finished he slowly slipped the ring back upon his finger, watching the wax cool. Then he turned the envelope over twice and without another word passed it to me.

We parted company at the Houston station, and with the precious package of papers stowed away in my coat pocket I hurried to the Carlton.

There I found my sister and her husband out, but my rooms engaged and prepared for my coming. Not knowing how long we were to be in London, I had my luggage only partly unpacked and then, after a bath, repaired again to my sister's apartments, where a hearty welcome awaited me.

"There," declared Polly, after managing to plant a second kiss on my nose, an act of affection she seemed to consider necessary, "we have you at last under our protecting wing."

"'I' you mean, Polly dear," her husband interrupted.

"There is no question but what Alice is married?" I asked first off, with feigned alarm as I dropped into a chair.

"None at all," Polly declared with disdain. "I personally attended it."

"That settles it," I agreed. "But where are Sir Charles and the bride?"

"Gone."

"So soon? They didn't stop long."

"No. You see Sir Charles got this place down in—in——"

"In Scarvania," Frank assisted.

"In Scarvania. Now the King of Scarvania is dead, and as they are going to crown the new king next month, Sir Charles had to hurry away."

"And, of course, took Alice with him," Frank added so meekly that Polly's look of resentment seemed hardly justifiable.

"Oh, I see," I ventured; "and so they are off to shout 'The King is dead; long live the King.'"

"Exactly," Frank agreed.

"And to have a very stupid time, I'll venture," Polly put in. "No one knows where the place is. While Sir Charles told us how to get there in an impossible way, I verily believe he knows nothing of it himself. At least from the name one would judge it was a country of heathens."

"Oh, come," Frank protested, "you know the place is not half so bad as it is painted."

"But you can't locate it on the map," Polly insisted.

"But it's there," Frank protested, "for the Foreign Office says so. Of course it's a wee mite of a kingdom, but very important so far as its diplomatic relations with the rest of Europe are concerned."

"I see; it's one of those betwixt and between countries," I said as I rose to go; "every other nation wants

to gobble it up, but don't dare because of the other fellows. Perhaps Alice will yet make history."

"You get dressed for dinner, John, and be ready at half-past-seven," Polly ordered in her most severe voice, as if to place her mark of disapproval on my levity.

My sister's commands were followed most carefully and at a little before the hour I stepped from the lift and sauntered into the lobby to secure the necessary white carnation demanded by my instruction.

Passing quickly to the lower floor, I paused behind the screen at the entrance to the grill-room.

In the far corner stood a table containing in the centre a full vase of white carnations.

An over-large woman dressed in deep black sat at the far side, commanding a view of the door and whoever might enter. It was evident she awaited my coming and with a great deal of anxiety, for as she watched those entering with quick, sharp glances, her hand played nervously with her fork.

As her eyes fell on the carnation in my coat a look of eager relief flashed over her countenance. With a forced smile she acknowledged my slight bow and motioned me to sit at her left.

"You have them?" she demanded in a strained voice as she leaned forward.

"I was told——" I began.

"Yes," she nodded and then added: "For her."

My hand flew to my pocket.

"I cannot take them," the woman hastened to interpose as I was about to hand her the package. "You must pardon me, but her royal"—she paused hastily—"her—

that is, the one to whom the documents are to be delivered"—she smiled knowingly a sickly smile—"has met with an accident. She is confined to her room. I must ask you to go to her and deliver them."

"But," I protested, not at all relishing the turn affairs were taking, "you can certainly take the envelope to her as well as I."

The woman drew herself up proudly, or as proudly as she was capable of doing. "I fear not. Of course it seems as if I could, but—her royal—that is—" and she again made her apparent slip more noticeable—"is waiting now. Do not detain her, I pray you. Room 310 mezzanine floor. Knock twice, you will be admitted."

For a moment I hesitated, for this new turn of affairs seemed not only unnecessary, but little to my liking.

Without much relish I hurried to the mezzanine floor and sought the room designated. The door was thrown open, in response to my knock, by a maid, small and pretty, who dimpled as she courtesied before me. There could be no doubt but that my coming had been expected.

"*Entrez*, monsieur," the maid said, a mischievous smile breaking out over her face.

I passed into the room at my right.

The lights were turned low, and for a moment it was hard to distinguish objects in the room.

"Monsieur," a voice spoke from the darkness, a voice full of a low sweetness that made me turn quickly, "please enter. I must beg of you a thousand pardons for not keeping the appointment. I have met with an accident to-day, and am confined for a week at least."

"I regret exceedingly to hear of the calamity, madam,"

I replied, as I stepped forward to where I could see a woman seated in an arm-chair, her face so bandaged that only her eyes were visible.

"I have simply ruined my complexion, I believe," she replied in an exceedingly injured voice.

"I trust it will be far less severe than you fear," I answered, for want of something else to say. I itched to be done with the papers and be off. In some way the low lights and deep mystery did not whet my curiosity.

"Monsieur," she said, speaking slowly, "you have, I think, *for her*"—a slight accent fell on the two words—"a package. I can only give you my poor thanks for the great service you have done."

"It is nothing," I replied, as I instantly handed over the envelope. "I am only too happy to have been of some slight service."

"It is a great service, monsieur, and one you will be grateful you were able to perform when you learn for whom it is done."

I bowed, and as there appeared nothing more to be said, passed out through the door held open by the waiting maid.

As I stepped into the hall I drew a breath of relief, glad the documents were off my hands. Then as I walked slowly down the corridor I had a thought my part in affairs of state was over.

And yet as I was about to enter the dining-room I paused suddenly. Like lightning had come the startling thought that on the hand which had taken the envelope had been a ring much like the one I had picked up on the train from Chicago.

CHAPTER IV

A CHANGE IN PLANS

Sunday was soon passed, and Monday came cloudy and thick, as it is so often in London. Frank and Polly had planned to take the car at some unheard-of hour like five o'clock for a run to Stratford. Their persuasions had failed to stir me, for while I was by choice an early riser, five was not to be considered, even if Shakespeare's haunts were the objective point.

I, however, might as well have gone, for I was wakened before they left by Frank's knock at my door. He came, he said, in an endeavour to persuade me to change my mind. I consigned him sleepily to a far distant place and then made vain efforts to doze off again. I tossed for some time and finally gave it up. It was, therefore, about half past seven, having finished my bath, that I paused in the middle of my dressing at a sharp knock on my door.

I was a bit out of patience on account of being roused so early, but that feeling quickly vanished when I found Karl von Merlder in the hall.

As I threw open the door he pushed in, with only a curt word to my surprised and cordial greeting.

"Mr. Converse," he demanded sharply, waving aside my invitation to be seated, "I've come here to demand a reckoning with you."

"A reckoning with me?" I said, repeating his own words slowly; "what the deuce do you mean?"

I stood there in my shirt-sleeves by the door, while he remained, his hands behind his back, in the middle of the rug. He was watching me from under his low drawn eyebrows, and his sharp manner and short words surprised me.

"What are you doing in London?" he demanded.

"What am I doing in London?" I repeated, my astonishment growing and with it my resentment. I could not make the fellow out and hardly had an answer for him.

"Yes!" he almost shouted, his voice rising as he stood glaring at me. "I demand to know what you are doing in London."

"And I," I said, my voice growing cold and sharp, "demand to know what you mean by such a question."

"You know what I mean, sir!" he replied, his voice lowering to my cold tone. "You know what I mean! I've come here to force you to account for your cursed actions."

For a long minute I eyed him, hardly believing my own ears. Could this be my travelling companion? Had the man suddenly gone crazy?

"Possibly," I began, taking a sarcastic tone, "you will explain why you have called here this morning."

"Explain!" he exclaimed.

"Wait," I interrupted in a sharp voice. "Von Merlder, you certainly are not yourself. Sit down and explain matters. Sit down, man, I say!"

For an instant he seemed to calm himself as with a great effort. He stared hard at me, leaning forward and look-

ing closely into my face, and then sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"God help me!" he moaned. "God help me! I can't doubt you, and yet who can I believe?"

"Doubt me?" I said; "why in the world should you doubt me?"

"The envelope," he moaned, his face still buried in his palms.

"The envelope?" I repeated mechanically, still at a loss to understand.

"Yes, the envelope, the documents," he shouted, springing to his feet. "You got them from me; now what in God's name have you done with them?"

"The envelope I got from you?" I repeated with a laugh, for now the matter seemed very simple. "Why, I delivered it, of course, as you bade me do. I should have let you know, had you given me an address."

He stood there staring at me for a minute as if he had failed to hear my words. Then as if satisfied he suddenly held out his hand and a great calmness passed over his face. "I believe you. Forgive me, John Converse, for the doubt that was mine. But, God, man, how I have suffered this last hour! I have been tricked; I have failed. My country and my princess suffer for my blind folly."

"In Heaven's name," I demanded, "what are you talking about?"

"Listen," he replied. "Sit here. I am calm now and can tell you all."

I sat by his side and he told me briefly and quickly of his plight. The cable he had received at Liverpool had

been a forgery, though in code. Thus he had handed me his precious documents. In my turn I had given them to the one who had undoubtedly sent the false message.

"I'll say naught of my doubt of you," he ended. "I came here at once and now must be off for Paris. If I can reach Zakbar before those documents, I'll promise you they'll never get to Zergald's hands. That is my only hope now, to stop the person who has them."

In a brief instant, while I knew little of his secret mission, I saw the whole plan. Karl von Merlder was to come to some place with precious documents. Those who least of all would wish him success had managed to take them from him, and now he must wrest them back again at any cost.

"They have a start on you," I said. "I gave the envelope up Saturday."

"More need for haste. They have one day, that's all, for they would have to go by Paris and so left yesterday."

"They could have left late Saturday night."

"They would have to wait in Paris until last night. One day is all they have. By a hard ride from Kerlbad I may get there first."

I nodded, accepting what he said as true, though, of course, he spoke of facts and places unknown to me.

"Can you give me a description of the woman? I doubt if they will change hands again."

Then suddenly I recalled the fact that the one who took the envelope from me wore a ring like the one I had picked up on the train. In another moment I had pulled Von Merlder down into his chair and was telling him hurriedly of my suspicions.

He listened intently, and as I finished spoke bitterly.

"What a fool I have been! And yet I did not think a soul beyond her Highness and Kurlmurt knew of my mission. And she was on the train?"

"Yes."

"Tell me of the ring. It has helped us so far; it may again."

I described it and the woman carefully.

"I wish it were a man I had to deal with," was all he said.

"Would they not destroy the package as soon as they got it?" I ventured.

He shook his head. "They would hardly have the power. I doubt if they know its contents. If I get that envelope again, or when it reaches Zergald's hands, my seal will be intact as it was when I gave it to you."

"Can you secure it again?" I asked foolishly.

"As long as it is in existence there is a chance," he answered quietly.

"I wish I might be of some assistance," I said, feeling in some way I had helped bring about the loss of the envelope.

"Only forgive me for my doubt of you," he asked, holding out his hand.

I grasped it and smiled. "We come to a clearer understanding sometimes for a little doubt," I said.

"True," he answered as he wrung my hand. "Aye, Converse, and I wish the understanding was going on."

I caught his meaning and seized at the idea, though he has told me since he had no thought when he spoke of the thing being possible.

"And why not?" I demanded.

"You mean——"

"I know the woman. I have held the ring."

He hesitated a moment, a queer smile coming to his lips.

"And you know so much there is hardly any harm in your knowing more." He laughed like a boy.

"Assuredly there cannot be," I agreed.

"All things are favourable, none unfavourable."

"It seems so."

"It is so."

"Her Highness——" he began.

"Cannot object I knowing what I do."

"If you should not be discreet, it would be safer to have you under my eye."

"Beyond a doubt far safer," I answered.

"I could shoot you then, if needs arose," he said.

I nodded, as if he had said he could make me a fine present.

"It might be dangerous to leave you," he agreed.

"Beyond a doubt; and then, too, I'll have the whole journey to better describe this woman and her ring."

Afterward he told me he had made up his mind to have me with him as soon as the suggestion had well struck home. As that may be, I too had the same thought to go. So we each made good excuses why I needs must accompany him and why I could not with safety be left behind.

"You are a traveller," he suggested.

"A great one," I agreed.

"And if you should decide to make a trip——"

"You could not well stop me."

"But your sister," he suddenly exclaimed.

"Has found before I'm not good at keeping engagements," I answered.

Then we each looked at the other. He laughed aloud. I smiled, for it pleased me, and nodded. Then we clasped hands once more.

"To where?" I asked.

"To Kerlbad first. Then by horse to Zakbar. We may gain a half day by the ride across country. The woman will stick to the trains and lose on connections."

"Why not a special?" I demanded.

"It's the state's business."

"And demands haste," I said.

He sat at once to the table, wiring Paris and other points for right of way.

I scribbled a note to Polly and threw a few things into my bag.

"Take riding togs," he suggested without turning, "and if you have a pistol——"

I nodded as I packed on. The thing had got into my blood, was coursing through my veins like madness and I felt afire for the trip ahead.

"There may be some personal danger," he said quietly. He had turned from the desk and was looking down on me as I packed.

I nodded, snapped my bag together and rose. "Well!" I said.

"We leave at ten for Paris and then on to Scarvania," he answered with a smile.

"And we'll have the papers yet."

"God willing," he agreed.

CHAPTER V

A BIT OF HISTORY

By the time the train reached Dover we had agreed the thing was well done. With a bound our acquaintance had ripened into knowledge, trust, and final belief. Danger makes close friends. In truth the danger was not in sight, but, like a battle charger, we both scented it, and feeling sure it was before us, laughed and joked as if it were a day afield.

"Karl," I said, using the Christian name purposely; "it's a good day."

"John," he answered with great seriousness, seeing the lead, "it's fine weather."

Then we laughed, shook hands again and leaned against the railing. Passengers near by looked at us in some surprise.

For a while we said little, and then Karl turned to me and spoke as if uttering his thoughts aloud. "Scarvania, John, is a little kingdom tucked away in the hills of southern Europe. In many respects quite English and a trifle American. Our late king, God rest his soul, was progressive, and therefore we stand more open and ready to accept American impetuosity and resourcefulness. In the States I have met many of your countrymen. I can understand why his late Majesty believed in America and Americans."

"We at least know how to do things," I agreed.

"Sometimes we do them too quickly, very often we rush in, as the saying goes, where angels fear to tread, but still one can only blame us for our impetuosity, an over-anxiety to do. A man can be pardoned for a thousand errors when he really does something."

"Aye, but you do them without error."

"Then I'm not an example. In giving up that envelope I committed a very grave one."

"I'm to blame for that."

"Well, it's only placed a trump card in your opponents' hands," I protested. "We'll draw it onto the table yet."

"You are encouraging, at least."

"Never say die," I laughed.

"We won't," he agreed."

"Good! And now what's the order? Do we stop in Paris?"

"No; we go on at seven."

"Just time to make it then."

"We must hurry. We have two days and two nights ahead of us."

"Your country *is* tucked away."

"Yes; so far away that one hardly ever hears of it. In truth," and he laughed gaily, "I'll venture nine-tenths of the world doesn't realise that Scarvania exists."

"Well, it's very real to me just now," I replied, "and I only trust I'll find it as interesting as I anticipate. Some way I've woven a bit of romance about the place. I'm a good deal of an air-castle builder, at best, Karl, and as I dozed coming down on the train, I had fine castles in the air of you and your country."

"Dreams go by contraries."

"Not mine. I'm a true dreamer."

"Then let's hope you saw a crown held over a fair head."

"I only had my castles built when I awoke. I hadn't peopled them as yet."

"When you dream again open the door and peep in." I smiled and nodded.

"By the way," Karl suddenly exclaimed, "I thought you told me the woman to whom you delivered the papers was all wrapped up in bandages and that the room was very dark."

"I did; but remember I recognised on the hand that took those papers the same ring I picked up under your chair on the Chicago train."

"She must be one of Zergald's spies. By Heaven, I didn't think the game meant so much to him until I gathered the evidence of his duplicity. Fool! Fool! I should have watched more carefully. Kurlmurt will never forgive me."

"Crying over spilled milk won't do," I warned. "We are to be in time when the trump cards are played, and it's from our own hand they are to come."

"Aye, you're right! I've been made a fool of by Zergald. Yet I'll turn the trick or die in the attempt."

"And I'll help you do the thing," I said, "but I shan't die, win or lose. I've too much respect for the joy of living, and can, if Fate turns the hand against me, make a good loser."

"Don't talk of losing!" Karl exclaimed almost angrily.

"We won't," I replied, meaning plainly that we would neither speak of it nor do such a thing.

At Calais the change to the train was quickly effected. On the way to Paris I wrote a letter to Polly, explaining matters a bit more fully than I had been able in the brief note written at the hotel.

I knew she would never forgive me for deserting them, so resolved to give her little satisfaction as to my whereabouts. "I have," I wrote in part, "a very important diplomatic duty to perform in the south of Europe. You see, my dear sister, the thing is so very delicate that I cannot even give you my destination. To think that I should so soon follow in Sir Charles's footsteps and take to the service. Alack-a-day, that you could not have furnished a wife to accompany me. But still, on second thought, Polly dear, a woman at times is not a desirable appendage, and so perhaps it is as well, for my journey is both dangerous and one that requires my whole mind.

"I am truly sorry to fail you and Frank at the last moment, but leave your address at the Elyssée Palais, and I'll join you as soon as my present mission permits."

The first day out from Paris a good opportunity presented itself, and Karl gave me in brief some little insight into the state of affairs in Scarvania.

"One year ago, to begin with," he explained, "our king died very suddenly. He and his brother, the Grand Duke of Murwurth, were driving, when the horses became frightened and ran away. Both were killed instantly, being thrown over a steep precipice.

"This left of the House of Rulfburg her royal Highness, the Princess Hilma von Cedra, daughter of the late king, the Prince Joachim, son of the king's brother, who was killed, and the Grand Duke of Kurlmurt, youngest

brother of the king and the uncle of the Princess Hilma and the Prince Joachim.

"Now in the natural order of events, the son of the Duke of Murwurth, the Prince Joachim, is heir to the throne and would be crowned at the appropriate time."

"I see," I interrupted, "and you prefer he should not be compelled to bear the burdens of the kingdom."

"You are right. Prince Joachim is neither a fit man to rule our country, nor a safe one. He is entirely in the hands of the Grand Duke of Zergald, who is now prime minister and who has nearly ruined the state and the personal fortune of our late king."

"The Duke of Kurlmurt, brother of the king, naturally favours his niece instead of the prince. In this nearly all the people of Scarvania join him. She is the idol of one and all. Zergald, however, by the laws of our country is in full power until the grand dukes select the late king's successor, and that selection, as he controls the grand dukes, will beyond a shadow of doubt be Joachim."

"But I can't see what earthly claim your princess can have," I objected; "the prince is the rightful heir, no matter how undesirable he may be."

"That is where these documents come in," Karl explained, speaking very low.

"The prince's father, the Grand Duke of Murwurth, visited England and the States some thirty years ago. He took his wife with him and was gone some six years in all. While they were away the Duchess died, presumably giving birth to the prince. I have been to America, however, and the affidavits, now lost, prove that the

Duchess of Murwurth died in September, 1879, while the Prince Joachim was born in June, 1880.

"Aye——" I nodded, understanding the thing now.

"Prince Joachim has no title to the throne and is, as Kurlmurt has always contended, an impostor, the illegitimate son of his brother, the Grand Duke of Murwurth."

"But is this generally known?"

"Only by a very few. Zergald undoubtedly knows it. Of course he will conceal the fact for his own personal advantage. If he can crown Prince Joachim, he will readily control matters, whereas, if the Princess Hilma becomes queen, Kurlmurt will be in charge."

"But," I protested, "suppose you do prove Prince Joachim illegitimate; I fail to see how you have gained your object."

"Why not?"

"You wish to place your princess on the throne?"

"Assuredly."

"If you prevent Joachim, you throw the natural line of succession to the late king's younger brother, not to the princess."

"No! No!" Karl protested; "the Salic law does not hold in Scarvania. Has not for—let's see—not for the past three hundred years."

"Then the princess would be the next in line?"

"Assuredly. You see, the Salic law held with us until back somewhere in, I think, the seventeenth century. Then it was changed by the grand dukes for much the same condition as now exists. The princess as the daugh-

ter of the late king can succeed to the throne if she has no brother or first cousin."

"Then all you have to do is to prove that Joachim was born after the duchess's death," I said.

"Then the princess is crowned queen."

"And these affidavits are alone needed."

"And they are lost."

"But isn't Zergald taking pretty desperate measures to keep himself in power?" I asked.

"The affidavits not only deprive him of power by proving Joachim illegitimate, but show that he has misappropriated our late king's fortune and a part of the state's to his own personal use. I find that he holds vast interests in your country, and he could only have acquired them by mismanagement of his trust, for he had no private fortune."

"Then his game is desperate."

"So desperate," Karl replied, "that you are in personal danger when you join forces with his opponents. A man like Zergald will hesitate at nothing. He sends me a forged cable. His spies secure the evidence I hold. If we attempt to secure that envelope again his next move will be by the hand of the assassin."

"A very delightful country, this Scarvania of yours," I remarked dryly.

CHAPTER VI

ZAKBAR

Our journey was in many ways full of excitement. Special trains were placed at our disposal and we hurried on, an object of interest to every railway official on the route.

Two nights and two days from Paris brought us to Kerlbad, a little town on the frontier and a small junction of two roads.

There we were to desert the railroad, secure horses, and by a ride across country reach Zakbar by the back door. The railroad went around by Merzberg and thence to Zakbar, a much longer route. In this way, we hoped to avoid any spies Zergald might have on the watch and get into the city before the woman could arrive.

Acting on this plan, we sent our luggage straight through, changed to boots and breeches in our compartment, and got down from the train at Kerlbad.

Perhaps fifteen minutes were needed for Karl to get two mounts, and with my leg across a good-looking bit of horse flesh, and the clear mountain air in my lungs, I felt like a new man.

"We'll not spare the animals," he said, as we set out through the streets at a slow trot. "Fresh horses are to be had as often as we need them, so now it's a case of ride, and ride hard."

The idea appealed to me, and I expressed my willingness to ride the legs off any number of animals.

"I shouldn't be surprised if the woman is behind us now or even in this town," Karl ventured.

"Wouldn't it be worth while finding out?"

He shook his head. "If we can get to Zakbar first, Kurlmurt can put out a net that will catch her as she comes in and before she gets to Zergald. To wait here and look for her might ruin all. You see, we can't wire him any facts."

I nodded, for I saw he was right. Then we struck more open country and were soon on our way in earnest.

Of that ride little need be said. I've ridden to hounds in nearly every country, but never did I have such a ride as on that afternoon. We left Kerlbad at three, and we changed horses five times before we made Zakbar.

If you can play out five horses in a little over three hours, then certainly the man astride them, after two days and two nights on the train, should be nearly finished as well.

Our road was at the best wicked. Through gorges, wild hill country, rough, rutted and stony, we took the shortest route and beyond a doubt the shortest was the worst.

Karl led the way, I close behind him, and the fellow showed himself a horseman that day beyond all question. If Hell had been closing on our backs and Heaven ahead, no man could have ridden harder or truer.

We stopped only for fresh mounts, and were fortunate to find good ones. At each stop we had a biscuit and some wine, and then again into the saddle and on.

Finally Karl drew rein. We had made the last change in horses and were coming to the downward part of our journey. The road fell away, and we could do no more than walk our animals.

Each shifted with relief in the saddle.

"A hard ride," he said.

"Harder than I ever made before."

He raised his eyebrows. "You don't look fagged."

"I am, though; and yet a good meal and a bath will do wonders."

"You'll have the chance. We'll be in Zakbar soon now. You go to the inn at once while I report to her Highness and Kurlmurt. I'll then come back to you."

"We are close in?"

"Around the hill and below you will see the city itself."

It was growing near dusk; a soft haze telling of a long twilight was in the air.

Suddenly the road made a wide sweep and I pulled up my horse in silent admiration.

Behind rose the mountains; below the ground fell away, and there before us stretched a long valley. The mountains hemmed it in, breaking back and opening to our right and left. The whole looked like a huge amphitheatre, a colossal colosseum, and in the centre lay an emerald lake.

The valley was, perhaps, thirty miles long and ten or twelve wide, the lake five long and two wide, and it lay like a huge emerald in the midst of a land of dark green and brown.

As we looked down upon the panorama, the city of Zak-

bar lay on the left of the lake, stretching along its shore, a white spot in the green shaded picture.

"Over there," Karl said, pointing to a line of dark turreted castles on the right of the lake, "live many of the grand dukes. The third is Zergald's."

There was a bitterness in the tone, and I understood, I think, the thoughts he had.

"At the end, under the great trees, is the inn. Far up the lake is the palace of our princess; see, there at the great tower. That is the square. It is the cathedral, and on the fifth she shall be crowned under it."

"Aye," I said; "and now on."

The first sight of his native land after so long a time made him forget our need of haste. Now remembering, we pushed on slowly over the rocky road that led to the valley below. As we went the sun began to sink behind the far-off hills.

Then a few twinkling lights sprang up in the city, while across the lake, first in one of the old castles, then in another, counter lights flashed forth. The heavens turned a deep purple, flecked with long shafts of silver grey. The emerald green of the lake changed first to a deeper green, then to a black and then at the far western end, reflecting the lights in the sky, to a red purple, barred with silver lines.

It was, I think, the most beautiful sunset I had ever seen, and made me feel that Scarvania could but be a delightful spot to rest in. Certainly it was a most auspicious introduction. The lights of the houses seemed to flash a homely welcome, and the whole city possessed an

air of quiet and rest easy to realise. Could it be possible, I wondered, as I gazed down on this fairyland of lights and colour, while a soft, cool breeze floated up to us, that this city was one of strife and vainglory? Could men plot and plan, scheme and connive under such a sky and by the side of such a lake? The whole thing must be a bad dream, and Karl von Merlder a sadly mistaken pessimist. Surely, in such a land people could live in contentment, if anywhere. Here was the Old World's quiet and rest in a Swiss fairyland setting. No one could be unhappy here.

And then as I gazed, fascinated by the shifting panorama of lights and colour, we passed on, and in a few moments struck a level road, arched by fine old trees. Putting our horses to a canter, we soon covered the half mile or so which brought us to the inn.

The greeting of the landlord, who came rushing out at the sound of our horses' hoofs, was one to make any man glad to reach his roof. In a few brief words Karl placed me in his care, and then with a nod to me that he would be back before a great while, flung himself into the saddle and was gone.

I followed the landlord into the inn, and found myself in an incredibly short time as comfortably housed as I could wish for.

No change of clothing was possible, but a bath, even putting on my soiled riding togs again, made me feel refreshed. Then I called for dinner, hunger forbidding me wait for Karl, and the landlord himself attended me.

As he hovered about my chair, Karl's introduction seemingly bringing special attention, he fell to speaking

of the princess, and I, nothing loath to learn more of the woman I was to serve, listened attentively.

Karl had praised her beyond measure, but he, having grown up with her from a child, was, perhaps, prone to exaggerate. So now I was glad of the opportunity to learn the opinion of an older man.

If I expected milder words I was disappointed, for the landlord was as lavish in his praise as Karl had been.

"The princess, then, would be the people's choice," I said in reply to some remark he made.

"A hundred times over. Ah, monsieur, you should but see her once, and then you would understand why we all love her so. She is fair—some say beautiful—but I, well, I have served her, and I say first she is kind. When she smiles on you her whole face lights as with goodness, and you feel that she has done you a great favour."

"No wonder, then, you prefer her to the prince."

"If you but knew her—but could see her—you would understand better," the old man responded.

Dinner over, I strolled out upon the broad piazza which ran about three sides of the inn and afforded a magnificent view of the lake below.

For some time I stood in silent contemplation of the park and the flashing waters of the lake shining in the glistening light of a new moon. Finally I returned to the inn, and was half way down the hall, when a commotion at the entrance caught my ear.

"The carriage has broken down," I heard some one call, and then the landlord ran by me, flushed and excited.

Thinking an accident had occurred, I hurried toward the porch.

I rushed out the door, and the next instant was making my apologies to a young girl, tall and fair, who had practically run into my arms.

We both drew back, and I fear I made a sorry spectacle as I gathered up the gloves and handkerchief which she had dropped as we collided.

"It was my fault as much as yours, sir," she admitted, a merry smile playing across her half-parted lips.

"I fear it was mine entirely," I insisted, suddenly noting the servants grouped on the porch.

"Rather, no one's fault," she suggested, taking her gloves and thanking me most graciously.

Realising I was still blocking the doorway, I stepped aside that she might pass. A woman followed her and then the landlord, who shot a glance in my direction, as though there was some meaning he would convey to me.

A carriage stood in the drive, over which two grooms were labouring to replace a broken tire.

The two dark bays, splendid animals, caught my eye, and I stood for some few minutes admiring them and watching the grooms at their work, when suddenly the landlord rushed to my side so flushed and excited he could hardly speak.

"Her Highness, monsieur! Her Highness would speak to you!"

"Her Highness?" I questioned.

"Yes, monsieur. Her Highness—she would speak with you!"

"Her Highness?" I repeated, and then suddenly I realised what he meant. "Do you mean to say she—the one I just—that *she* is the princess?"

"She saw you were a stranger, and asked of you. I told her you had come with Count von Merlder, and she bade me call you back. You know—" his voice lowered—"his late Majesty was very fond of English-speaking people, and so her Highness would speak with you."

"The princess?" I repeated, hardly believing that this girl could be she.

"Yes, monsieur, yes," the landlord insisted. "She will be leaving as soon as the carriage is ready, and she would see you. Come!"

He led me, still half doubting, to the porch at the left, where under a light sat this girl, their princess, in whose cause I had come to Zakbar.

She was talking with a woman little older than herself, but as I came forward rose quickly, a welcoming smile on her lips.

With all the grace in the world she held out her small, daintily gloved hand.

"It is a pleasure to welcome an American to my country," she said with a rare smile. "Our good host has told me that you have just arrived, and I am glad I could so speedily greet you. It is not often one of your country travels so far as to little Scarvania."

It was a simple welcome, and I appreciated that it was extended to me as a representative of my nation, not as an individual. I looked up as I took her hand, and realised I was speaking to a woman not only beautiful, but one who spoke but to be kind, who thought not of herself but of others. There was something in the face that I had never before seen in any woman's face—some-

thing you felt at the first glance, and yet you could not say what it was. Her eyes, which studied you so calmly, were deep and clear and yet so full of latent power and fire. There was only the slightest colour in the cheeks. The whole face seemed rather pale.

She was tall—tall as myself—straight and slight. Her light golden brown hair, falling back from her forehead, was coiled low at her neck. Her eyes, I noted as she spoke again, and I looked into them, were deep blue, and their depth made me think of the lake.

"It is kind of you," I replied slowly, "to give such welcome to a stranger in your land."

"It is kind of a stranger to come to us," the princess replied softly. "We see so few from the outside world. We must go to them, for they never come to us. A stranger is indeed an event," she added, as if possibly to explain the reason for her speaking if I had not already discerned it.

"If your fairy lake and land were known, you would find your little city overrun. The tourist is always looking for wonderlands."

"It *is* a wonderland, is it not?" she agreed, turning quickly and with pride to the subject of her country. "I go to beautiful places, but I never think any of them can compare with this when I come back and see it again."

"And I have just had that pleasure for the first time but a brief hour ago."

"Ah! you are to be envied as well as welcomed," she exclaimed. And then, as a groom approached: "My carriage is ready and I must hurry on. I trust you will find

your second impression of our little city as pleasing as the first."

It may have been meant as a dismissal, but I had forgotten it was to a princess I spoke, who bade one begone at her will, and instead of making my adieu, moved forward at her side.

Again for a brief instant her hand rested in mine as I helped her enter her carriage. Again I looked deep into eyes that seemed to have no bottom to their depth. Again she smiled, the rarest smile I had by chance ever seen. Then she was gone.

But I stood there, staring like a yokel—stood there for a good two minutes before I realised the servants of the inn were in turn staring at me.

Who was I that took such liberties with their princess! Who was I and why had I come? Why had I come?

CHAPTER VII

THE GRAND DUKE OF KURLMURT

The next morning I was up early and had my breakfast served on the little veranda that opened from my rooms and overlooked the lake.

One could hardly imagine a more entrancing spot. Before me stretched the emerald sheet of water. On the right-hand shore the deep battlements and turrets of six castles dotted the rocky edge of the lake, seemingly almost a part of the massive rocks from which they rose.

Far down on the other shore, a white quay, perhaps a quarter of a mile long, was plainly visible, and close to it many small boats were moored.

If the town had looked like a fairyland in the sunset glow and its twinkling lights, now, under the warm rays of the rising sun, it seemed carved from ivory, and no more than a play-city set by an emerald sea.

Truly, the fairies live in the castles yonder, and each night they come sailing across the lake on gossamer wings to deck this little village with a new coat of alabaster, and they do it because the good people of the village at morning light set afloat on the emerald waters cases of honey and figs that go drifting over to the castle walls.

It was truly a dainty picture, set in a frame of dark green mountains. The whole looked small, far smaller than it truly was, for the upper end of the lake was lost to view by reason of a bend in the shore.

With such a view before me, and while a cool breeze came wafting across the water, I sat and ate my first breakfast and began my first day in Scarvania. It seemed now, even more than when I viewed it from the mountain road, that it must be the home of peace and contentment.

Surely, I could not help thinking, no one would dispute the right of the princess to rule these people. She above all others must be eminently fitted to govern such a fairyland.

"Second impressions?" I questioned aloud. "Yes, the second impression is better than the first" and then I fell to thinking of my strange greeting of the evening before. And while I sat thus thinking of many things, of my greeting and of my talk with Karl, late into the night, I looked out over the waters and saw a small launch crossing toward the inn. The boat moved over the rippling waves and turned them back from her bow in white flashes marked vividly against the green waters.

There was something fascinating about the little vessel, it moved so quickly, so easily, and withal so truly. And then as I noted there was but one occupant in it, and that a woman, I turned from the table and leaned my elbows on the railing of the veranda. There was something familiar about the figure in the boat.

It ran on close to the left shore, and for an instant shot out of view behind a jutting headland. As it came into sight again, drawing nearer, my waiter came to carry away the tray, and catching sight of the boat, spoke quickly.

"It is her royal Highness, monsieur. Each morning

when it is fair she goes out either in the boat or for a ride. She can run the engine, she can do anything."

There was deep admiration and pride in the fellow's tone.

I nodded, for I had recognised the occupant of the boat almost as he spoke. My one wonder was that I had been in doubt at all, for how could any one once having met her mistake her.

She sat well back by the engine, steering by a side lever, her body leaning forward slightly in an easy position, as if alive to each movement of the boat or the shifting wind. She wore no hat, and her hair flew about her face, while her lips were parted a trifle, as if slowly and daintily to drink in the fragrant breeze.

The impression of the first meeting was heightened by this second glimpse, and it was only that, for the boat kept well out from the shore.

As it headed away I dropped my chin into my hands and sat watching the last glimpse of the tiny launch, my elbows resting on the railing.

"What was it?" I asked myself slowly. "Was there something remarkable about this girl?" for she drew me to her in some strange way. I had seen her once. I had, it is true, heard of her, and I had come a champion in her cause. Yet it was not that. There was some strange thing that drew me to her and held me a most willing prisoner to her interests.

And then as the launch ran in toward the shore at that point where the grounds about her castle reached the water I rose slowly, stood for a moment looking out over the lake, and then turned toward the park. A sudden

longing came over me for activity. Why did not Karl come and let us get started on the matter.

I passed down the steps and turned into the garden on the right of the inn, but had hardly started down the path when an officer in a dark grey uniform came toward me. In another instant I recognised Karl.

"I was just expressing a wish you would turn up," I exclaimed as he grasped my hand. "Let's see, what's the title?" and I nodded to indicate the uniform.

"Captain, captain of the guard. I'm detailed as aid to our general, the Grand Duke of Kurlmurt."

"I see; and how does the duke accept your explanation of the lost papers?"

"He has said little. If he had said more"—there was a sharp catch in his voice—"I would have wondered less. He feels it means defeat."

"When did you see him?" I demanded.

"I have just left him. He was out of the city last night, as you know, so I only saw him this morning."

"And the woman?"

"She has not arrived, so far as we can learn. We are on the watch now, so will know as soon as she comes."

"Good! And in the meantime?"

"Come with me; Kurlmurt is at the palace. He wants to see you."

"I am prepared," I answered.

We passed out of the park about the inn and down a long avenue which led straight through the heart of the city, and to the square.

It was my first real glimpse of Zakbar. From a distance

it had seemed small, but once treading its streets, that impression left you.

In the square one had the feeling of being in the capital of some country much larger than Scarvania.

On the left as we entered stood the castle, a huge pile of grey stone, with its ancient sally-port, moat and drawbridge.

At the far end stood the cathedral, a more modern building, with a flight of broad marble steps leading up to its wide entrance faced with eight massive pillars.

Opposite the cathedral was a huge building used for military purposes. On our right the square was open, and a wide approach led straight to the lake, running from the square to the lower end of the white quay I had noticed from the inn. Down it and across the square faced the castle. A wide avenue led out between the castle and the cathedral, and between the castle and the barracks. These four streets entering the square, in the centre of which was a fine bronze statue of the late king, with the parkway leading down to the lake, the whole width of the square itself, made it seem very open and the buildings much smaller than they really were.

We passed across the square over the drawbridge and through the sally-port, received the salute of the guards in their dark green coats, white breeches, high boots and brass helmets. The gold lace on the green and the rich contrast of that colour to the white made a very attractive picture.

The court of the castle echoed to our footsteps as we turned in through a deep door at the right and up narrow winding stone stairs to the second floor. It was all

old, and I marvelled with much interest when I learned that while now used for business purposes it was the original stronghold of the old duke who broke away and, with his retainers, set up the kingdom of Scarvania so many hundred years before.

It was the same castle he had lived in, the same castle from which his men at arms had sallied forth to uphold his rights, and had been the home of each succeeding king, until Michael I., father of the late king, had built himself a new castle farther up the lake, the one now occupied by the princess. Then this one was given over to the ministers and grand dukes. Each grand duke had a suite of offices within its old walls, and in the banquet hall, high arched in stone, with fine old coloured glass windows, much like a chapel, they met in weekly session.

We walked on through low-ceiled passages and finally entered a large apartment. From there on extended a smaller room.

As we crossed the threshold a short man arose from the desk, over which a mass of papers were scattered. He was dressed in a uniform similar to Karl's, and the first thing that struck me was his face, which while set and almost stern bore a slight mark about the eyes clearly indicating that at times this silent, grisly old man, the Grand Duke of Kurlmurt, was not as savage as he looked.

The greeting was brief and no more than over when the duke came to the point at once.

"Captain von Merlder has explained to me your connection with this affair, Mr. Converse, and that you have

with him deemed it advisable to come here in the matter."

I said that I felt I might be of some slight service in recovering the lost documents, knowing the woman as I did.

"True! True!" the old man said, as he leaned back in his chair and studied me sharply from under a pair of grisly eyebrows. "But there is little chance of that."

I could well see he was bitterly disappointed at the turn affairs had taken and saw little hope of success. His next words more than confirmed my opinion and also let me know he was annoyed, that I, a stranger, should be brought into the matter at all.

"No harm has been done," he said with a sharp glance toward Karl, "and yet the matter stands where it was before. Without evidence nothing can be done. The matter will be dropped. What could be done has been done. We have lost."

I saw Karl move uneasily. We were both younger men and believed that there was hope while a chance remained. Yet Karl was bound to obey. I was not. I could speak freely, nothing prevented that, and I resolved to do so. I had a mind suddenly to see the matter through.

Had I not met the princess? I would join her cause, coming as far as I had, whether this gruff old grand duke was willing or no. And then I noted again the wrinkles about the old man's eyes. I had only to thaw him out a bit and he would welcome my help, and gladly. At that task I set myself.

"I fail to see just how the matter's at an end," I suggested.

"Possibly I understand this matter better than you do, sir," he gave me back promptly.

"Certain documents are lost," I went on calmly. "As yet the woman who got them has not arrived in Zakbar. We stop her before she does and take them back." That was what there was to it, as I saw it, and I put it plainly.

The old man looked at me calmly, and I felt there was a gleam of merriment in his eyes. But whether it was sarcastic mirth at my so lightly considering a hard task I could not say.

"There is no harm in trying, general," Karl put in. "You have men on the watch now. When the woman is reported let us have a chance at her. If John recognises her we'll get that envelope again."

"And bring a hornet's nest down about our ears. Will Zergald sit by, think you, and let it be done?"

"Let's do it before he knows of it," I answered. "Once done, what do you care for him?"

"If we get the papers you have him in your hands," Karl protested.

"Now he has you," I remarked dryly.

"By God, he has," the older man exclaimed, suddenly coming to his feet, while his voice broke with more than a mere acknowledgment of the facts. There was sorrow, regret and bitter disappointment on his face as he stood there looking broken and old.

I slipped close to him as a thought came to me.

"If a young American, who can easily be charged with all the indiscretion you choose, should fall enamored of a certain woman and carry her off, your police would raise a riot of trouble, I suppose?"

"They would if they heard of the matter," he said, looking up at me as if hardly seeing my meaning.

"Exactly," I continued. "This foolish American learns where this woman is, when she crosses your frontier. In his deep infatuation he contrives to have the train she is coming on stopped at some lonely spot. It's a hold-up."

"Aye, it's a hold-up," the old man growled, looking at me more sharply as a bit of understanding appeared in his eyes.

"Enough money is taken to lend an air to the thing, for the American wants it to look like a hold-up, after all."

"A fine air," Karl exclaimed.

"The woman is carried off."

"I hear she is handsome," the general agreed.

"Your aid here, Captain von Merlder, sets out in pursuit of the rash American, learning of the thing by chance before your police. The American, to save his skin, abandons the woman. Captain von Merlder nearly overtakes him, but fails at the last moment, by his mount giving out. He, however, secures the woman's personal effects, which the rash American has scattered on the road, after abandoning the woman. These he returns to her, minus, er—*possibly*, a few stray papers lost in the general mix-up."

"It's as good as fiction," Karl exclaimed with a shout.

"It can be made as good as facts," I ventured, watching Kurlmurt's face.

"Aye!" he said, nodding his head slowly to the clock

on the mantel—"aye—a rash American might make it as good as facts, if we had one."

"That's why I came," I answered, lighting a cigarette, "and can, I think, furnish credentials for rashness, if you'll have them."

CHAPTER VIII

AN INVITATION TO CALL

The aspect of affairs changed at once. Like a soft snow melting before a warm sun, the Duke of Kurlmurt's objections gave way to our plan. He saw hope again in the scheme, and I found him giving me as hearty a welcome as Karl could have done.

The old man chuckled over the thing like a schoolboy, adding suggestions of his own, advising me not to let any of my countrywomen hear of the matter and promising with great good will to do his best with the newspapers.

"We'll give you another name, if nothing more, Mr. Converse," he said, and then fell to chuckling over the idea again.

Thus it was settled, and there was nothing to do but get a dozen trusted fellows together and await word that the woman had arrived on the frontier. We had no doubt she would come at any moment, so we made our plans carefully.

"And if the woman doesn't come?" Karl asked inconsistently, when we had the whole thing settled.

"Zergald will want that envelope in his own hands before he places Prince Joachim's name before the grand dukes," Kurlmurt said.

"Would he have the woman pass it to him through a third party?" I suggested.

The duke shook his head again. "He uses as few as he can. His plans, you see, were so arranged that Karl would not know who received the papers. That was undoubtedly an important point in the scheme. Then the woman could come here boldly without being recognised."

It looked plausible, and satisfied it must be so, we made the final arrangements for recovery. Then all matters settled, Karl and I took our way back toward the inn, leaving Kurlmurt to prepare my gang of "ruffians" who would assist in the holding up of the train.

"It couldn't be better," Karl declared enthusiastically. "Beyond a doubt we'll have the papers by night."

"Or we'll wait a week toasting our shins in impatience," I said.

"I would rather have the matter over and done with."

"True," I agreed, "and yet the woman hasn't arrived, and I'm of the opinion she'll not come for some days. There is no need for hurry on her part. She could wire she had succeeded, then wait in safety until your return, and when Zergald was satisfied no suspicion rested on her she could proceed. They have plenty of time."

"In any event, we can trap her on this plan."

"Unless she comes as we did," I said.

"Impossible!"

"I should think so."

On our way back to the inn we turned in at the wide park which skirted the lake, and made our way along its gravelled paths. On our left was the emerald water, on our right the city, while about us greensward and huge trees. The large oaks were magnificent, and as trees,

especially old ones, were a delight to me, I enjoyed the stroll immensely.

"It's a wonder," Karl suddenly exclaimed, "that we didn't have that rascal, Heinrich of Vankle, to deal with."

"Heinrich of Vankle," I repeated, "and who may he be?"

"The greatest scoundrel you would care to meet."

"One of your prime minister's attendants?"

"A sort of private secretary of his, the man who does nearly all of Zergald's dirty work and a goodly amount on his own account."

"Perhaps he has a finger in this."

"I'll be surprised if he hasn't. He may have secured the woman, for women are his tools. He's as handsome a rogue as you would meet anywhere. I hate the fellow, I despise him, yet he has an easy manner that almost wins me, knowing him as I do."

My interest was naturally aroused, and at my urging Karl told me much of Heinrich and his deeds. The telling fascinated me. I learned of tricks he had turned for Zergald, full of boldness, but lined with deep cunning, and I made up my mind we had him to thank for the loss of the documents. Possibly, if this were the case, the woman would report to him, and he would be the one to whom the documents would go first. However that might be, our present plan would stop them reaching any one. Zergald had not counted on Karl's knowing who had the envelope from him; thus his plan stood liable to fall.

I so figured out the matter, and figured correctly, too, had not another stepped in and by his scheme and plan,

for personal gain, upset our plans. But of that we then knew naught, so went on in our own way to what we thought and hoped would be a quick solution of the matter. And so it would have been but for this third party.

As Karl was telling me how Heinrich, caught in some tavern brawl, had held off a dozen fellows unaided, he turned upon me and demanded if I knew aught of swordsmanship.

"Do you mean can I fence?" I asked. "Well, a little, but why?"

"Because," he replied with an expressive drop to his mouth, "you may find you'll have occasion to test your skill before you get through with this business."

"I don't follow you," I said.

"Suppose we run up against active opposition from our dear prime minister or some of his cut-throats. If I were you I'd drop a Colt in my pocket and brush up my sword arm a bit."

"I think I'll trust to American methods if necessity arises," I answered, taking his remarks rather lightly.

"I know your people are quite proficient in the manly art of self-defence, but when you have to do with a chap who has six bullets or a long, keen blade it will hardly do."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

He looked at me in astonishment.

"Most certainly I am," he answered. "You surely don't think this little programme of seating her royal Highness on the throne of Scarvania is to be child's play?"

"No," I agreed slowly. Yet I suddenly realised while I answered in the negative that up to that moment I had considered the whole thing a good deal of a lark. The sharper wit was to win, and I, with the common assurance of my race, had counted on some clever trick turning the winning hand for us. But now I began to see there was something else in the matter. A Colt and a strong sword arm! If I was to hold up a train, the Colt would be needed assuredly, and a tight place might turn up where the bark of a pistol would be inconvenient beyond measure. Still, I was not convinced, but to please Karl, for he urged me sorely, we secured two foils, and going to a secluded part of the park, fenced for upward of an hour or more.

I had always considered it the best of exercise, and now was glad I had some knowledge of the art. Karl had a hundred lines of attack I knew little of, but my physical condition was such that I was able to fall back on the common tricks of the defence and wait for an opening to strike home.

At last we finished, both a little short of wind, but our blood a-tingle and a flush of healthy life on our faces.

"I'll trust you to give a good account of yourself," Karl said as we dropped onto a nearby bench. "I'm above the average swordsman in our army, and you'll meet no one better than I, unless it is Heinrich, who is, if anything, my better."

"I'll leave him to you, Karl," I said with a laugh, for I had no idea I would cross blades with any one. "I think you'll welcome the chance."

"That I will. By Heavens! I trust this matter gives

me the opportunity. I've an account to square with him."

I looked at my friend with surprise, for he spoke bitterly, as one who bore a long unsettled grudge and wished for the chance to square it. But I said nothing more, not caring to seem inquisitive, and instead urged the hour for a return to the inn and luncheon.

With luncheon over, we sat on the veranda off my rooms smoking and talking. Karl told me much of his country, and an hour or so slipped by unnoted. And while we sat thus the sound of clanking sabre and jingling spurs came to our ears. I rose quickly, for such sounds were still strange to me. A trooper, gorgeous in his trappings, was riding up to the inn.

"One of the guards?" Karl asked.

I nodded, and in a few minutes a knock sounded on my door, which opened at my answer, admitting the same trooper.

He came forward, a veritable clanking ramrod, and saluted.

"From her royal Highness, the Princess Hilma von Cedra of Rulfburg," the fellow announced, holding forth a small envelope to me.

I took it, as I was standing, but passed it to Karl without looking at the address.

"It's yours, my dear fellow," he said, handing it back.

I broke the seal mechanically, for some way this uniformed bearer of notes made me feel unnatural. He stood so stiffly, eyes staring at the distant landscape as if seeing nothing, that I felt stricken dumb and mechanical as was he.

But there was no mistaking the note, and as soon as I had scanned it I found my voice.

"Tell her Highness, the Princess Hilma von Cedra of Rulfburg, I shall obey immediately," I said.

He saluted, wheeled like a piece of machinery and went clanking out. I heard him mount, and while I watched him silently he rode down the avenue again.

For a moment time turned back. I was a knight girding on my armour and preparing for the fight. I had been summoned, for there under the trees rode the messenger who had come on his black charger to bid me draw my sword for her rescue.

Was it not possible? Had not the hours for once ceased their rush onward and let the pages of time turn again to the days when one could draw his sword and fight for a "faire ladie"? In such a quaint old world town as Zakbar the lists might be opened. Under the great oaks where the deer grazed one might still hear the tread of armoured feet and the rustle of sweeping skirts. Why could not time turn back for once and take me with it?

And then Karl spoke, and with a start I realised to-day was to-day and the world would not turn back.

"She asks me to call," I said.

Karl nodded, rose and called to the waiter for a cab.

"Kurlmurt must be with her and have spoken of our plans," he suggested.

We walked around to the front of the inn as the cab drove up, and were soon rolling through the town past the castle and the cathedral and down the long avenue beyond.

I was still wrapped in my day dream of a tall girl who had greeted me, a stranger in a strange land, so kindly; of a girl who, with keen eyes, hair blowing in the wind, steered a tiny craft over sparkling waves; truth, kindness, coolness, beauty; a tall, stately woman who was a queen, if she be never crowned. And as I thought, Karl talked on. Many, many things were in my mind that day. Some came true, some—well—in all things one cannot be a true dreamer, and for that I must not mourn, if I mourn at all. Who can tell? One moment we feel content, glad that we have some things, and then—no matter how contented we may be our spirit rebels. We are strange, we humans. But what would the world be if we were not?

CHAPTER IX

A RED, RED ROSE

Soon the buildings were left behind and the road made back from the lake and up a steep rise to the higher ground which lay beyond the city.

At one point we drove again close to the water, but high above it, and there a fine view of the castle, which was our destination, could be had.

It stood boldly on the edge of the bluff, which made down almost sheer to the water below. Wide terraces surrounded by balustrades led about the castle, and on the lake side were built to the very edge of the rocks. From the back one could look straight down a hundred feet or over to the lake.

On the sides the terraces led to the gardens, while on the front the massive oaks made in close and the park of trees ran back to the road a good half mile.

We paused to view the castle, standing so boldly, for a moment only and then drove on.

At last we came to the huge iron gates and turned into the grounds themselves.

Under the trees the deer looked up in silent curiosity, and I felt as I caught sight of the grey turrets that our cab was by far too modern a conveyance. We should have been mounted on prancing chargers. Were we not bound to the aid of a princess, lodged in a grey old tower by the shore of a lake? Beyond a doubt my adventure

should have begun a hundred years before, to suit the fancy of my mood that day.

When we stepped down by the door Karl greeted the majordomo, who directed us to the terrace on the right.

As we turned the corner I caught my third glimpse of her as she sat talking earnestly to the Duke of Kurlmurt.

Undoubtedly he had already told her of our plans, as Karl had the night before briefly informed her of my connection with the matter.

And now she desired to see me, to find, I suppose, what manner of man had been added to her forces.

She bade me welcome as she did Karl, as if I too had grown up with her from childhood and came no stranger to her home. I might have but returned after an absence from Zakbar and, in fact, I almost rubbed my eyes to see if it could be I was awake.

"You are prompt," she said; "and have brought Karl with you." She laughed quietly, beckoning us to be seated.

If she meant to put me at my ease it was done admirably. I could but admire, and yet rather than admiration came the feeling she was so different from other women.

I realised I was accepted as one of them, taken into their formal company; question or doubt had passed. What they knew I knew. There was no—You understand matters are so and so, or we refer to this or that. It was as if I had always been one of them.

In a pause I looked about me. The balustrade of the terrace was old. The grey lichen on the castle walls, the ivy on the tower, all spoke of days long gone by. My two companions wore a uniform that might have decked

the bodies of their sires, thrice removed. Only the princess and myself were modern. My stick should have been a sword, my hat a helmet of steel and my legs encased in hussar boots. As for her, she should have worn nothing but what she did, for so simple a gown became her wonderfully. The low open neck marked the clear throat the better, and there was about her a dainty touch of Old Worldliness. I felt alone modern, and yet no whit the less one of them.

That day, a brief hour after my coming, no one suggested by word or deed I was a stranger. Is it then any wonder I felt as I did?

Then as the conversation lagged a moment the princess rose.

"I'm sure you wish to see our old gardens," she said, addressing me. "We'll walk through them, if you like?"

We went down the wide steps and along the gravel path between rose bushes in full bloom. The fragrance of the flowers was in the air, while a cool soft breeze came from over the lake.

"This is the garden my father liked so well," the princess said gently.

I felt suddenly that no matter how fully I had been accepted before, I was by that simple remark now more truly one of them than ever.

"It is very beautiful. One could walk here and rest or decide grave matters," I said.

She looked at me gladly.

"You understand. He would walk here of an evening, down this path to the far end, then back to here," and she stopped by a low bench on the edge of the cliff.

"Here he would sit and watch the distant sun sink to rest over the hills beyond the lake. In the air was the fragrance of the flowers, as now, and behind him, far beyond, the hum of his city."

As she spoke we stood there by the seat overlooking the lake. The cliff fell away abruptly and the sun was travelling fast toward the distant hills. The lake flashed in its rays.

There was something holy in her speaking as she did. I had never even seen a likeness of her father, and yet I could picture a grey-haired man with a strong yet kind face standing there, as she did, looking out over the valley and smiling softly at his thoughts.

His brow would have been deep and full, as was hers, his chin firm, and in his face, as in hers, would have been a look of perfect understanding and faith. Men would have followed him to death. As her father stood she stood, and he who would have followed him would follow her.

Then I suddenly understood why she had brought me to the spot and why she had told me of her father.

"You wonder why I have come to Zakbar; why I should try to help?" I said.

"Yes," she answered simply as she seated herself on the stone bench. She did not look at me, but kept her eyes on the distant hills. Yet I knew it was here, under a spell that would demand the truth, if any possible deceit was in me, that I was to explain to her the reason for my coming.

"I should like to hear," she said.

Then I spoke slowly. I told her of the strange coin-

cidence on the train, how I had come to meet Karl von Merlder and taken the papers from him, only to give them to the wrong person; how we had met that Sunday morning in my rooms at the hotel, and then of our sudden decision that I should come.

"We both seemed to feel that it should be so at the same instant," I said. "Perhaps there is really nothing in Fate, and yet I think we both knew the ball had fallen and we were cast to move on, our forces joined."

"And Karl has told me of your trip."

"And then," I said, speaking slowly, "we met there at the inn. You welcomed me first to your city. Karl showed me the way and you welcomed me."

"I could not have done less to one who came to help my country."

"But you did not know that then."

"No. I only knew you were a stranger in our land."

"And because of that gave me welcome."

"America," she said slowly, as if again explaining that welcome at the inn, "was always a country of great interest to my father."

"I understand," I said.

"And America," she asked, turning to me eagerly, "tell me of it? Ah, there no such tasks would come to one. There I would never need to choose between my wishes and my country's need."

I understood what she meant, I thought. She did not seek to rule her country, and yet it was necessary that she should. Her people demanded it. Her cousin had no right to the throne. That fact, coupled with the knowledge that he would be no more than a tool in the hands

of the Duke of Zergald, made his coronation a calamity. What course, then, was there open to her? She stood, no more than a girl, torn between her natural desire to be free, to do as she would, and the keener demands of her position.

I spoke not at all of America, but instead of her.

"I think I understand. The path you must follow is hard."

She turned suddenly, a little catch in her voice; there almost seemed to be tears in her eyes.

"I cannot say so to them"—she pointed to the terrace where Kurlmurt and Karl waited our return. "They must not think I find it hard, for there is my father. Yet—oh, it is—so hard. I know what one and all will ask of me if I am crowned. I shall always have to stay here. Before I could go away quietly, but when I am their queen"—she smiled sadly—"I will be no more than a caged bird."

"But perhaps—" I began suddenly, carried away by my sympathy and completely forgetting myself.

She looked up with a sad smile and a shake of her head.

"No! No! I cannot hope. I will be crowned. I have no other right. My country needs me. There is no turning back—and—and—ah, Mr. Converse, when the time comes, when I am queen I shall be brave."

"I have no doubt."

"Yet now——"

"It would be better had I not come," I said suddenly.

"Instead, it is very kind of you. I have so few. You are like—like—" she hesitated for words—"like Karl, with whom I have been all my life. I felt so when I first

saw you. It seemed then as if we could know each other and understand, so easily. Because my father spoke of your country so often, I think you must have been drawn here by some strange force to help us all. He knew many Americans and you seem—" she smiled faintly—"like—but how shall I say it—like the example—the man, the one whom my father referred to when he spoke of your country and its men. I have been thinking of it since I first saw you, and some way I too feel Fate has sent you. What I have learned of your country makes it possible for me to understand you, now you've come."

I listened, wondering much, but understanding, I think, what she meant. Still, it seemed I had come but to make her task the harder. Only I knew the woman, and so I spoke the thought that was in my mind.

"If I should suddenly go away—if Zergald got these papers, you could not be crowned."

"No! You must not think of that," she answered quickly. "Because I spoke as I did I only meant to explain. I did not mean to complain. I did not mean to hint."

"Ah," I exclaimed eagerly, "I wish I could carry you away so that you might escape all this. Then you could not help yourself, you would have no choice."

God knows my words were meant innocently enough. I spoke in metaphor only. Yet she turned upon me suddenly with a startled look in her eyes, and by her glance made me see more in them than I had meant.

I made no explanation but stood my ground, looking down deep into her eyes as she studied mine.

Then suddenly she seemed to understand my true meaning, or at least she made an end of the discussion.

"I shall be their queen," she said, smiling slowly and looking out across the lake.

"Aye, your Highness, we will make you queen," I said. for I knew it was the only way.

She did not turn and look at me, but stood staring straight before her, yet on her lips came a faint smile as she spoke again.

"But not your queen, not queen to the one who will help the most."

"In my country I have none, so I shall claim you as the others do."

"As the others do," she said, growing serious. "Aye, they claim me and I must obey."

She turned at that, and we walked back toward the terrace where Kurlmurt and Karl still talked. The sun shot coloured shafts of every shade across the heavens as slowly we went back through the winding paths of the garden.

The roses filled the air with their fragrance, and a hush as seems to come when soft music is played filled the air.

My mind was full of strange jumblings. I dreamed, awake as I was, a dream no sane man would think of in his waking moments. And yet so strange had matters turned I felt anything could happen. She was to be queen. On that plough handle I had set my grip, and a straight furrow must be driven no matter if other things would suit the fancies of my dream the better. There was but one thing to be done.

As we neared the terrace she stopped, and plucking a

deep red rose, pressed to her lips. Then as she started on she stopped again, glanced toward the terrace where Kurlmurt and Karl stood talking, and slowly plucked two more, not as red as the first.

Then she turned to me. A smile was on her lips and yet there seemed a serious note beneath.

"The emblem of my champions," she said, smiling gaily, and she placed one on my coat.

"These two"—she held up the others—"are for uncle and for Karl. I have you three—good friends all, and come what may you'll wear my emblem."

"Aye, your Highness, your emblem always."

We went on, gained the terrace, and with laughter and deep courtesy she gave to Kurlmurt and to Karl their roses. But mine—I saw it was the deepest red of the three. *I* saw it. I do not mean to say that Hilma saw or realised it was the one she had pressed against her lips.

CHAPTER X

AN INVITATION TO LEAVE

Late that evening Karl returned with me to the inn.

To our astonishment, a note from the Grand Duke of Zergald, requesting me to call the next morning, was found lying on the table in my sitting-room.

What the summons could mean neither of us was able to determine. I got my feet in a low chair, a good cigar, with some brandy and soda at my elbow, and expressed my opinion. Karl, similarly fortified, his feet on a table, expressed his.

The discussion went on late into the evening or early morning, I can't say which. From the purpose of the note we digressed to the general matter in hand, then back to the note, and finally back again and once again.

Karl argued against my paying the slightest attention to Zergald's request, but I laughed him to scorn. No one would send such a letter and then knock a man in the head. Besides, what reason had he of suspecting me. Certainly he did not know that I was connected with the affair, unless his spies had forwarded my description—hardly likely—as the one through whose hands the envelope had passed. It was possible that he might be suspicious simply because I had returned with Karl, and seemed to know the princess and Kurlmurt. And then it suddenly struck me that he might think I was a living

witness to prove that Joachim was not the Countess of Murwurth's son.

This idea seemed plausible until I realised I was but a little older than Joachim. So finally we let the question rest until I should see Zergald and ascertain first hand why he wished to see me.

I did believe there would be an opportunity in such a visit to possibly learn how much the prime minister knew of what had transpired.

When I rose the next morning and as I ate my breakfast, with the lake sparkling before me, my thoughts were on anything but the coming interview.

I plead as an excuse to being mortal with hot blood in my veins—no more. For years I had been led here and there, this woman presented to my view and then another, as if they were so many puppets, to be married for the asking. What my natural disposition toward women might have been, had I been left to Fate and not to my sister, I can never tell. As it was, the disposition such circumstances formed for me was one of tolerance and, I trust, good behaviour in their presence. Never a real liking for any single one, as I was told I should have.

And yet why talk of it? The truth was that so far designing Polly had presented not the right one. If she, instead of circumstances, had led me to Scarvania, I have no doubt the "result" would have been the same. That there was already such a "result" from my coming I made no pretence of concealing from myself as I sat there that morning.

The princess of a strange country had met me first and

given me greeting. I had seen her grave, I had seen her gay, I had seen her sad. But what odds. I had seen her, and for me that was enough. Only two days had passed, the scoffing cynic could say, since I had set eyes on her. Let me ask, Sir Cynic, is it a thing for days? A passion that will burn for ages must needs light sometime and of an instant. This love that needs a goodly fanning and a stout pair of bellows is not to my liking. Tinder is the outer shell of love—tinder that flames with the spark of first sight, and thus lights well the core, hard as a weathered oak, to burn for ages.

A perfect understanding is, I'll allow, a thing that asks for time. The perfect knowledge of your love, however, comes as with the spark that lights the tinder shell.

And thus it was with me. I knew the truth, and gloried in the knowledge, still keeping in mind I was there upon an errand.

Then the thought of my coming interview returned, and I rose, prepared to go. Karl had warned me against some trick—he said quite plainly Zergald was equal to it. Kurlmurt had whispered that it would do no harm if I dropped a pistol in my coat.

However, the thing now to do was to see what was meant. I fancied, and I told them so, that I might come from the call wiser than I went. The advice of Kurlmurt I shunned. It hardly seemed the thing to doubt the man that wrote asking for your company.

When my cab drove up to the old castle in the square, the two sentries at the door saluted, and I passed in under the great arched sally-port that rang with each footfall, as if to act as one's announcer. The court itself was

half in shadow, half in sunlight, while over the grey walls the ivy twined in a solid mass.

I was passed on by a sentinel to a chamberlain in a red coat and white breeches with much gold lace. He led me down a wide corridor and through an antechamber or council room.

Four men grouped near a flat table in the alcove caught my eye.

They looked up with no little curiosity as I came down the room, and one of them, a tall fellow, most striking and handsome, whom I instantly took to be Heinrich of Vankle—Karl had given me a good description of him—nodded to himself slowly four times and smiled.

His manner had the easy bearing of a man quite sure of himself, who had no question of his position and power. The other three stared in respectful curiosity, but Heinrich—for I soon learned it was he—looked me over with some little insolence in his manner.

In a moment I had passed the group, but had no doubt they watched me until the green doors at the far end of the room closed upon my back, and I heard myself announced by the attendant.

The room I entered seemed over small, but that, beyond question, was because of the largeness of the antechamber. In the middle was a flat desk, covered with many papers, while about the walls were cabinets and shelves well filled. It had the look of a workroom, and the small man seated at the desk had the sharp, keen glance of a worker.

The first impression of the Duke of Zergald was, if anything, favourable, and while I came to know him

afterward as a man with little pity, I never saw him but what I was drawn to him by something in his face.

He looked up as I stepped forward, and I saw that he was, if anything, undersized in stature, with an ashen face, cold steel eyes and a thin, grey-pointed beard. His upper lip was hardly covered by his moustache, it was trimmed so closely.

Then, without a smile or a change in his expression, yet with a gentleness and courtesy that made me think he had been somewhat maligned by my friends in their over-zealousness, he bade me be seated.

"I must thank you, Mr. Converse, for calling," he said in a low, even voice. "I am an old man and go out but little."

I had resolved to let the duke lead the conversation where he would and trust to chance to gather from his words what he knew.

"It is I who feel honoured at the summons," I replied in an instant to his greeting.

"Scarvania is rather out of the beaten track," he suggested.

"I am a great traveller and delight in new places," I answered quick'y enough.

Assuredly the Duke of Zergald was coming to the point without delay.

"And your good friend, Count von Merlder, was kind enough to recommend us to you?"

"I think it was I who made the suggestion," I answered.

The duke nodded slowly.

"True!" he said. "The count would hardly ask a new

acquaintance to help him even when in so nasty a predicament."

Did he know that I had but recently met Karl, or did he want to know if I had? Was he referring to the loss of the envelope as the "nasty predicament"?

"I should hardly say the count and I were new acquaintances," I answered.

He shot a glance at me from under his eyebrows. He did not know how long I had known Karl von Merlder, of that I was sure.

"With some men acquaintance grows strong in short order," he suggested.

"I quite agree," I said, and then added, to give him something on which to ponder, "Do you think Count von Merlder such a one?"

He shook his head a little peevishly at the question.

"I do not think I know the count well enough to answer."

"I should have said you knew the count full well."

He looked at me as if he thought I was trying to pin him to an answer of his own question, as I assuredly was.

"Perhaps I do," he said; "perhaps so well that that knowledge has assisted me."

"I should say from your standpoint you had made good use of it," I answered, thinking of the false message.

"Unfortunately for some, we all must have our standpoints."

"Unfortunately, I should say, is the very word," I agreed.

"From some points of view, unfortunately is hardly the word at all."

"Knowing both sides of a story, one must take a position," I replied.

"Do we always know both sides when we think we do?" he asked.

"If not, perhaps one would be glad to learn," I answered, meaning to give him a chance to tell me what he would.

I think he understood my words, for he nodded slowly, much as had Heinrich of Vankle in the anteroom.

"I think you're right," he said, "and thinking that, I would say Scarvania feels honoured at a visit from so distinguished a citizen of the United States, but regrets affairs of state prevent his proper entertainment. Under such circumstances, the train that leaves at half-past ten to-morrow has a compartment reserved for whoever should care to travel at that hour."

So this was the reason of my visit. I was not to learn what he knew at all. Simply I was told by the Duke of Zergald himself, so there could be no misunderstanding, I had best depart. The reason why he wished me gone he kept to himself. Frankly I felt flattered.

"I am a man who cares little for social pleasure," I suggested.

He seemed surprised that I should care to fence longer. I half believe he expected me to rise, bow, and depart to pack my bag.

"Indeed!" He could not help letting a sting creep into his words. "You seem to have made many calls for so short a time in Zakbar."

"On my good friends, yes. For strangers, no matter what their position, I care nothing."

He glanced up sharply, and I was glad he saw the meaning of my speech. He had seen fit to bid me go, and I felt justified in telling him I cared nothing for his wishes.

"We sometimes make mistakes in choosing our friends," he said coolly.

"My countrymen are noted for their discernment," I replied.

"Therefore, I feel it is only necessary for me to suggest the morning train to-morrow," he answered smoothly.

"Your scenery here is worth studying, as you perhaps know."

"Yes, I know," he agreed with a snap. "I know that and more, perhaps"—he paused and let his cold grey eyes rest on me for a moment—"than you think. As I said, the compartment on to-morrow's train will be comfortable."

"My rooms at the inn could hardly be more delightful."

His jaws snapped suddenly and his eyes flashed for an instant, then he asked in a smooth tone:

"America is worth going back to?"

"It is in my opinion," I agreed. "And after a few weeks' rest I shall return."

He shook his head as if at some mistake, but only murmured to the paper knife in his nervous fingers: "The compartment—will be held."

Apparently, it was only to tell me this that he had asked me to call. So I rose, and as I did so, he turned toward me with a look which said plainly, I counsel you to take my advice.

But why should I? He was against the princess, and

I was assuredly for her. If it was to his advantage that any ten men of Zakbar leave the city, it must be to ours to keep them. What he knew I had not learned beyond that for some reason he demanded I should leave. For that very reason I declined.

As I walked into the antechamber the four men looked up, and because I smiled to a big picture on the wall, they neither nodded nor smiled themselves. Not even Heinrich of Vankle, and he could smile, I learned, under nearly any circumstances.

As I walked on down the long hall, unattended, I stepped into an alcove on the right to look out upon the court. It was a pretty sight, that grand old castle yard. Here and there old cannons stood, and under the covered walk that flanked its sides stacks of old arms could be seen. The sunlight played in at the window where I stopped. Through the old leaded glass centuries before the warm rays of the sun had filtered, as it did that day, and as it fell softened and warmed the picture.

I felt the surroundings as I had the great oaks by the lake. I was in an ancient setting, in which men had planned and sacrificed themselves. What once a frame held it always will, I mused.

I turned slowly from the picture, and found at the curtains to the alcove the tall, handsome fellow who had nodded and smiled in the antechamber as I entered, Heinrich of Vankle.

I looked up inquiringly. Without preamble he spoke.

"I happen to know the reason of your call," he said.

I nodded, wondering what now was coming.

"And"—he had paused to let me speak if I would—"I come to tell you, who know him little, that he is a hard man to go counter to."

"Are you his messenger?" I asked.

"The duke needs no messenger when he speaks himself," he answered.

"Then," I could not refrain from saying as I looked him over, "what need is there of you?"

His dark eyes twinkled as he replied most gently:

"No man likes to see another risk his neck."

I raised my eyebrows. "Then there is danger?" I asked, feigning alarm.

I do not know whether he thought me a coward or not, but certainly he took my lead.

"Men have not heeded his advice before, and by night they were—" Heinrich of Vankle ended his speech with a shrug of his expressive shoulders.

"It will be exciting then," I said.

He looked at me wonderingly.

"It will hardly be that if you fail to be in at the finish," he answered.

"But I shall be," I said. "I've come to town for the coronation."

"Oh!" he said.

"Of your queen," I finished.

At the words he looked fixedly at me for a moment, and then a smile played across his handsome face. Finally he threw his head back and laughed heartily.

"If you answered old Pepper Box like that, I don't wonder his mood is ugly," he said between his mirth.

"Then he did send you after me?" I asked.

He passed the question by.

"Take it for what you think it's worth," he said. "You had better go."

I thanked him for his interest, but said I thought I should stop awhile.

"I've no doubt you will if you so decide," he agreed.

"I've said I would."

"Then I'll tell Pepper Box he'd as well give up the compartment?"

"If he meant it for me he may, most assuredly."

"He meant it for no one else."

"He didn't say, you know."

He looked at me again and laughed.

"Well, we'll be against each other," he said, holding out his hand. "I'll wish you luck."

I had heard that Heinrich of Vankle was without honour or trust, yet I liked the fellow well what little I had seen of him, so I took his hand.

"I'll not wish you luck," I said.

"No?" he asked.

"If we run counter," I explained, "my wishes would not be true."

"You're quite particular."

"Careful, at least."

He laughed again, waved his hand, and turned back the way he had come. I watched his graceful figure pass down the corridor. He was tall, well built, and looked like a man of strength and courage. That I would have a chance to test his good and bad points I had no doubt. I went down the steps and out the court, the two senti-

nels saluting; then through the sally-port, and as I crossed the bridge kicked a pebble into the moat.

As far as I could see my interview was like the disturbance the pebble made in the dark waters—only a ripple on the surface of events.

CHAPTER XI

A NEW UNDER SECRETARY

I WALKED back from the palace, feeling the interview had come off quite favourably. In truth, I had learned little beyond the fact that Zergald was anxious I should quit Zakbar. Yet that was to my mind an admission. If he had the papers in his hands why should he care whether or not I remained in the city?

When I got back to the inn Karl was awaiting me. He was anxious to know what had happened, and we went at once to the little balcony off my rooms, where we could have luncheon and talk without interruption.

The meal fairly started, I began to tell him of my interview with Zergald and my later talk with Heinrich of Vankle.

When I finally finished, he leaned back in his chair.

"I'll promise you they're puzzled now."

"We learned as much as they," I said.

Karl nodded. "And now he's asking himself beyond a doubt who you are, and asking it harder than before."

"To find that out and to bid me begone was undoubtedly the reason he sent for me."

"And now what do you do?" Karl asked.

"Wait for 'Pepper Box' to move again."

He laughed heartily, for I had told him how Heinrich had named his chief.

"You do not use the compartment, then?" he asked when he ceased his laughter.

"If the papers are recovered before that hour," I answered.

I do not think he felt I would go, but I suppose it did him good to hear me say I would stay, for he praised me much for my loyalty to those of whom I knew so little and my disregard of the danger which he seemed to think was great. It was light talk in the excitement of the moment.

But as he talked on thus he suddenly stopped and leaned across the table.

"You only stay to aid the princess?" he demanded.

"Assuredly! To see her crowned."

"If you do not go you'll be of little help."

I knew full well he was not thus to my face belittling my services, no matter how he might in his own mind regard them, and so I asked his meaning.

"He has the power to place you under guard," Karl answered.

"To arrest me if I fail to obey?" I asked.

"And unless I am mistaken—and I think I know him well—he'll do it."

"What is to be will be, I suppose."

"Is it worth the risk? Had you not better place yourself where he cannot reach you?"

"Run away?"

"I would not say that," Karl answered. "Yet will you gain anything by staying?"

I turned to the lake to consider the matter. There would be little gained by my flying in the face of the

impossible, yet I was loath to run away. Then my mind, by chance, ran back to that day upon the train when first I had seen Karl; to my sister's letter and the talk with her and Frank in London.

Suddenly a name came to me, and I turned to Karl, who waited for my answer.

"You have a British Legation here?" I asked.

He nodded.

"The ambassador is Sir Charles—something or other——"

"Bander," he nodded again.

"Right. And he has just come?"

"He has just arrived in his official capacity, though as a friend of his late Majesty he was here a great deal the last few years."

I nodded now myself.

"He is lately married?" I asked.

"They tell me that he is, though I have never seen the lady."

"Then," I answered—for I had a plan—"I think I'll circumvent Duke 'Pepper Box.'"

Karl could little see my meaning, and for once I would not tell him what I had in mind.

"We'll see," I said. "We'll see if I can turn a trick to our favour."

And then, as if to end our talk, the tramp of heavy feet was heard in the hall, and Lieutenant Barnsmurk stepped out upon the balcony.

"Her royal Highness, the Princess Hilma von Cedra of Rulfburg, bids you attend her, captain, and to bring this gentleman."

We both rose to our feet.

"At once, Barnsmurk?" Karl asked.

"This afternoon, at your leisure," the lieutenant answered.

"We'll come at once," I suggested to Karl.

We were about to turn from the balcony when I noted a launch coming down the lake, and stopped to see it approach.

It ran up quite close to the shore, and while we were unable to note the faces of its occupants, we could see there were but two men aboard.

They stopped the boat and dropped a small box overboard, which floated where it was left. Then turning, ran out from the shore and stopped again, the box on a line between the balcony and the launch.

Suddenly a puff of smoke sprang up from the boat, and the sharp sound of a rifle came to us. We watched the bullet strike the water.

"They're firing at the box!" I said.

Karl was watching the men closely.

"It's strange," he said slowly, as another shot was fired. "Such a thing is not allowed."

As he spoke, two more shots rang out, and then in quick succession two more. The first two bullets struck the water far over the box, but the second two carried well on and struck the beach at the bottom of the garden.

Karl grasped my arm, and I turned to him. His face was white and set. Before we could move two more puffs of smoke flew up, and almost before we heard the report the bullets struck about us.

A cup on the table flew into bits and splinters of wood from the railing struck my hand.

The next instant Karl with an oath dragged me inside the door. Two more shots followed, each striking near the table on the balcony.

As we stood there neither spoke, but waited for the report of the rifles again. No sound followed, and we looked out to find the launch on its way down the lake, the box still floating on the waves.

"It may have been an accident," I said.

"It may have been," Karl answered with a bitter smile.

"However, it was very careless," I agreed.

"I think," he said slowly, "it is meant you should take the compartment."

"Then there was no danger, if their marksmanship was good," I suggested.

"None now. Wait though until after half-past ten to-morrow."

The landlord came running to us down the hall, and Karl explained briefly that some careless fellow had been shooting at a mark.

"Bring in what's left of your china. Get some putty and some paint, and say nothing," he cautioned, and the landlord with another look went back.

When he was gone out of hearing Karl turned to me.

"I did not think it would come to this. I have led you into too great danger."

"I chose to come," I answered, "and, besides, no harm is meant. It is only the barking, there'll be no bite."

"You do not know Zergald."

"He does not know me."

He looked at me as if not understanding what I meant.

"We'll mind the princess's summons," I said, as if to end the matter, "and there nothing will be said."

"I must speak to Kurlmurt."

"Aye, do, but not to her."

He nodded and led the way to the front of the inn, where we called a cab.

On the drive through the town few words passed between us. I put the incident of the launch to one side as of no consequence, for beyond a doubt it had no meaning unless it was a second hint, as Karl had suggested, that I had best take the compartment Zergald offered me. When he found I would not go I felt sure he would let the matter drop.

My plan for circumventing him, if he did arrest me, and also to set him thinking a bit more, was in my mind, and just as I put my head out the cab window to give directions that we should be driven to the British Legation, I caught sight of the one person I had need of.

Alice Bessling could help me, I felt sure, and when my eyes fell on her I was out of the cab in an instant.

"Drive round for half an hour," I called to Karl. "I'll be back."

He looked at me as if I had lost my senses, but I hurried forward without another word, for across the square Lady Bander's victoria stood by the curb.

If I left him in astonishment I certainly caused my old friend the same sensation when I stepped up to her carriage as she was about to drive on.

"Well, from where in the world! John Converse," she exclaimed when she found her voice.

Remembering my appointment with the princess, I sprang to the seat at her side without a word of explanation beyond asking her to drive home.

She gave the order and then turned to me with a "Well!" that in tone easily matched the surprise in her face. I suppose it seemed as if I had dropped from the sky.

"Allow me to offer my best wishes, Lady Bander," I said, remembering she had been married since I last saw her and it was due me to speak of it.

"Explanations! John, explanations! Yourself now. Where is Polly? Are you here alone or is she with you?"

I answered briefly, telling her as we drove on how I had met a friend, and so had come with him to Zakbar—that Polly was almost anywhere, as far as I knew and that, above all, I wanted an introduction to her husband.

"Business, Alice," I said—"important business, believe me."

"Business! You!" she exclaimed in hardly a complimentary tone.

I took no notice, but simply nodded.

"Business of a very important character."

"I'll have to introduce you, I suppose, but when will you call on me?"

"What are your days?"

"Days!" she answered scornfully. "Since when have you grown so formal?"

I laughed, but before I had need to answer we stopped before a large house, over which floated the English flag.

We found Sir Charles within, and before three minutes slipped by I had him to myself, for Alice withdrew, with great discretion.

There was precious little formality about me just then, and I cannot well say what Sir Charles thought of me that day.

But he was equal to my mood.

"There is no objection because you are not an Englishman," he answered to a question I put.

"Then you'll do it?" I asked.

"'Pon my word, it's most extraordinary," he said.

"It is," I agreed, "but Lady Bander will vouch for me."

"I've heard of you," he answered.

"If your knowledge comes from my sister, you'll not be surprised at anything I do."

He laughed, throwing back his head.

"It's a lark!" he said.

I nodded, content that he should think what he pleased, so long as he did what I asked of him.

"Well, I can't for the life of me make it out," he said, "but it's yours."

Suiting the words, he made out a huge official document which I signed and swore to. This he handed to me, and in another instant I was off, telling him I would come back later and explain more fully.

"Do," he said; "when you've twigged the thing put me on."

I nodded, stuck the official document into my pocket and rushed down the steps.

A cab at the door carried me back to the square where Karl waited with all the patience he could summon.

"Well?" he demanded, as I got back into the seat at his side.

"Haven't been gone long, have I?"

"No; but what took you off so suddenly?"

"You saw the lady?"

"Yes."

"Do you know her?"

He shook his head.

"A kind friend of mine," I said—"Lady Bander."

"The wife of the English ambassador?" he demanded.

I nodded. "An old friend of mine."

He accepted that as my reason for leaving him and would have asked no more questions had I not gone on.

"She introduced me to her husband, Sir Charles," I said.

"I see," he answered, thinking, of course, that was no strange matter.

"He's helped us turn another trick on Duke 'Pepper Box.'"

Karl was all interest now.

"I hardly think I'll go to jail, even if your prime minister so orders," I went on.

"But why?" he began.

"Do you think your government would care to get mixed up in a controversy with England?"

"Hardly," he agreed.

"Then, even Zergald would not place the English ambassador or one of his secretaries under arrest on a personal score?"

"Hardly," Karl said again, his interest growing. "Hardly on a personal score or for any other reason."

"Then," I said, as I handed him the sealed evidence of my appointment, bearing the fresh signature of Sir Charles, "I think John Converse, under secretary of the British Legation to the Court of Scarvania, will be quite safe."

CHAPTER XII

WORDS NOT GUIDED BY DISCRETION

As we drove on I told Karl more in detail to what the document in his hands bore silent witness. On the balcony of the inn I had conceived the idea, thinking suddenly that Alice Bessling was in Scarvania, the wife of Sir Charles. On that thought and on our chance meeting I had acted, and the result was my appointment—a joke, so far as Sir Charles knew—to the post of under secretary of the British Legation. If that did not set Duke "Pepper Box" thinking when he heard of it, I missed my guess.

"By Jove!" Karl exclaimed as he looked my appointment over again, "you have him. John! John! You have him."

I laughed with him, being glad he liked the trick.

"We have. And now the documents," I said.

"Aye, the papers," he agreed, growing serious.

As we came down the gravel walk to the terrace, the roses on each side of us, I saw Hilma leaning against the stone railing at the far end. She was talking earnestly to Kurlmurt and her face was flushed.

She leaned back, her arms outstretched, each hand resting on the stone balustrade. Back of her, through a vista in the trees, the blue waters of the lake made a setting for her light hair and fair skin.

It was a picture one seldom sees, and I drew in my

breath sharply as I caught her full profile, the blue lake close in, the green trees an outer frame.

"She is beautiful," Karl said in a low voice.

"Aye!" I answered without looking at him.

Perhaps there was something in my tone that made him glance at me sharply. Perhaps he had thought for an instant the same as I. Perhaps he guessed my feelings, and so perhaps he said what he did to set me thinking aright, if I should have been thinking wrongly.

"It would be hard to find a *prince* worthy of her."

"Not in his opinion," I suggested.

"No. There have been plenty quite willing, and when she is queen there'll be a hundred more."

"No mistake must be made."

"She will do her own choosing."

"A hard task."

"Thrice hard if we crown her; thrice easier if she is not crowned."

"For then?" I asked.

"She could go outside her rank and little be said," he answered, still looking at me sharply.

I wondered afterward if he suspected what I felt and said it to test me If he did he found out but little. Yet it set me thinking hard. If she was not crowned it mattered little whom she wed; but crowned, the realm would have the making of the match, and it needs must be consulted.

"She'll have the harder task," I answered, to still any question in his mind, if any there might be.

"Aye, she will," he said.

We stopped our talk, for we were drawing near. Then

the princess saw us and sprang forward with a glad cry, like a young bird. My heart leaped at the greeting she gave me. Truly, scheming and plotting makes conspirators quick friends.

We turned, the three of us, and walked back to where old Kurlmurt, gruff but hearty, awaited us.

"Well! Well!" he said, turning to me. "What news? You've bearded the lion in his den."

"That he has," Karl answered heartily, "and he's pulled his thin grey beard and set him thinking."

The princess clapped her hands and laughed softly.

"Tell us of it, Mr. Converse," she said.

I told them briefly of the matter, though there was really very little to be said.

When I finished I looked about me and saw that the princess and Kurlmurt had grown silent.

"It's strange," the old man said, "he has not the papers yet. Plague take it, where's the woman? My spies report to-day she has not reached the frontier at any point. Will he keep the papers out of the country until the fifth is passed, think you?"

"Then why should he wish John gone?" Karl asked.

I saw the princess glance up quickly at the use of my Christian name, smile and nod her head slowly. I wondered if the nod meant she agreed with Karl, or that she liked the name, so short and American.

"You're right," Kurlmurt said. "He has had no word from the woman. Yet why? He doesn't know whether you have the papers or no."

"I have it!" I exclaimed. "He thinks no papers have been secured, thus the woman has not come."

"But why, then, does he want you gone?"

"Because he thinks I am the proof. He finds me returning with Karl, and believes I know first hand of the matter."

The duke shook his head.

"It matters little what he thinks. He wants you gone; then surely it is to our advantage that you stay."

I nodded.

"The woman has not come. If she fails to do so—" he paused.

"Yes?" I asked.

He shook his head and turned on his heel.

"If there was a man among the grand dukes who lived not in fear of Zergald," he growled as he walked away.

Karl turned and took him by the arm, I think to tell him of the shooting on the lake.

"I think your interview with Duke Zergald to-day has told me something," the princess said quietly as they moved away.

I turned quickly to learn if she had found in the matter something we had missed.

"It is," she said, turning from me and looking over the massive rail down to the sloping lawn that ran to the rocky shore, "that you must go away."

It was said so quietly that I was startled at her words. For an instant I considered well her meaning and, if possible, her thoughts.

"Do you so order me, your Highness?" I asked.

She stood looking out across the lake and then after a moment turned again to me. I wondered much to see her as she turned, for there were tears in her eyes.

"I have no right to order you to go or stay," she answered, "but you must go. It is not right for me to place you in this danger. He is a hard and cruel man. Ah," she said, raising her hand and speaking quickly, as I would have protested, "you do not know him. He will stop at—nothing. And I have no right to ask such a sacrifice from you. They—" she motioned to her uncle and Karl von Merlder, who had now walked far away on the terrace—"they are in duty bound, but you——"

"I," I exclaimed as she paused, "I am as much your subject as they. One needs not be a Scarvanian by birth to serve its princess."

I was carried away for an instant out of myself. She stood there, flushed, eager, beautiful; her eyes bright, her lips parted, her breath coming quickly. The thought of leaving her was far away. The only thought, if I could think at all for the beating of my heart at the sight of her so troubled, was to stay to fight—to win anything she asked or wanted.

She smiled softly and looked at me bravely for an instant.

"You do not understand me," she said. "I know your loyalty. It is as great as any that I have, though you have come so strangely to us. But it is their duty, and I have the right to ask them to do this thing for me—to place me on my throne, where I have little wish to be, except that my father asked it and my people have the right and need of me. But you, I cannot ask you to risk your life. I have no right."

"Let me give you that right then," I exclaimed eagerly. And then, moved by impulse, I dropped upon my knee.

"I pledge loyalty to you, my princess, and I ask you to take that loyalty and demand of it what you will."

"Rise! Rise!" she beseeched, with a frightened look on her face. Not that some one might see us thus, for one before her on his knee was no uncommon thing, but for something else that came to her suddenly, as a flash of understanding crosses the face.

I rose and stood there looking down upon her. At that moment I would have spoken what was in my heart had I not known I had no right. Then suddenly, for fear I would say far more than I should, no matter if I spoke not at all, I turned away.

"I'll simply ask your leave to stay, and stay I will."

"But—" she started suddenly to say something, stopped, held out her hand beseechingly, drew back and turned away.

"You do not understand," she said.

Then forgetting all my caution, I stepped quickly to her side.

"But I do understand. You would have me go because you fear I'll be in danger. If you cared not at all what befell me, I would have a mind to go. Now do you think I'll leave?"

She hardly seemed to breathe, she was so still. Her hand flew to her cheek and her eyes turned to the lake and hills, far across the valley.

"Would it not be better that you went?" she finally asked.

"Because of danger?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Because of danger from him?" I asked again.

"Because of the danger," she said, hardly speaking above a whisper.

I knew the danger, and that, do what Zergald would, it was the least. Then as I saw her rising colour and trembling hand, I realised I had no right to speak as I had no right to ask to serve her and do it so.

It came to me then that any one coming as I had, under such circumstances, would be looked upon with favour far differently than if matters stood otherwise. Why should I think that this young girl, so set with difficulties, was thinking of me in any way except to try and shield me from the danger I was facing on her account? It was natural she should feel she had no right to ask of any one so much a stranger to her the slightest sacrifice. That, of course, was how she felt, and I had almost found a different meaning in the matter. She might see the meaning I was taking, and if so, how could she do else than ask me to go. My purpose was to stay and help her. Then certainly I could best do that by making the manner of my staying fraught with no such suggestions.

"I shall stay, your Highness," I began, and then suddenly I recalled my new appointment.

"I have," I said, turning to her and finding a new tone, "a place under Sir Charles Bander," and then I handed her the same document that had given Karl such mirth.

She took it, hardly understanding what I meant. But I began to explain the circumstances of the appointment, making the telling take on a merry tone.

She accepted the change of subject gladly, and when

Kurlmurt and Karl came up we were laughing over the thing quite gaily.

"You know Lady Bander?" the duke inquired.

"I have made mud pies with her," I answered.

They all looked at me as if I had lost my senses. Then I explained the matter. The princess listened, and when I had finished asked eagerly—

"What did you say Lady Bander's name was before she married?"

"Alice Bessling."

"Alice Bessling!" she exclaimed. "Why, I have met her. She was at Sir Charles's, in London, three winters ago. Sir Charles was a great friend of my father's," she explained.

"Three years ago!" It was my turn to be surprised. "Then you know my sister, Polly Woodbright?"

The princess clapped her hands in delight. "Why, yes, of course. I met her at the same time."

"The world," old Kurlmurt growled, "is pretty small, eh, Mr. Converse?"

"Far smaller than I ever dreamed."

"Well, don't dream," he suddenly advised.

I heard him clearly, but made no special answer to his words. Had Karl been telling him what he suspected? Or did Karl suspect anything? What was it that made me turn each and every remark to the feelings of my heart?

CHAPTER XIII

A PRETTY VILLA AND A SAVAGE YOUNG MAN

Kurlmurt and Karl drove back with me to the city, and we got down at the palace. As it was some time before the dinner hour, at which the two were to join me, I decided to take a stroll through the city before going back to the inn. So I set off on foot, down one of the wide avenues leading from the square.

As I walked on I had much to occupy my mind. I had undoubtedly been more than indiscreet, and blamed myself for it. And yet I thought with no small pleasure of the princess's concern for my safety. I had resolved to be more guarded in my words thereafter, but for all that there could be no harm if I regaled myself with the thought of her concern. If she cared not what happened to me she cared not for me. Then if she cared what happened to me, she— But why such folly! A man of sense would see the true reason for her anxiety.

If my sister and her husband had at that moment stood on the curb and looked me over, I should have passed them by, so engrossed was I with my reasoning. First, I had done right in speaking as I did, because she showed concern for me, and doing that she cared for me; and then—well—no man cares to say how much he decries himself or how great a fool he thinks he's been.

The fact was that I walked on, going over the thing in my mind, unheeding where I went.

At last I began to realise it was growing dusk and that I was in a street unknown to me.

Not liking to ask my way, but sure I would soon see a familiar landmark, I walked on and on. The houses became less pretentious, and soon I was treading narrow streets ill lighted with uneven pavements. I grew stubborn as I went on. I had said I would find my way unaided and I had a mind to do so still.

The passersby grew scarce and I could ask no one, if I would, for no one seemed to be about. The smell of poor cooking came to my nostrils, and I suddenly remembered my engagement for dinner.

Kurlmurt and Karl were undoubtedly awaiting me at the inn, and I felt I should not keep them longer. I stopped to look about for some one who could direct me the shortest way back.

As far as I could see no one was in sight, and a cab was not to be expected in such a neighbourhood. I stood, hesitating what to do or which way to turn, and finally gave it up and decided I must knock at some door to be set aright.

The house before which I stood was dark, and I looked beyond, to my right and left for a lighted window. All looked the same and each as uninviting as its neighbour.

A dim oil lamp flickered in the street light, and before selecting a door upon which to knock, I moved under it to ascertain the hour. When I saw it was well past eight, I realised I had need to hurry, otherwise my friends would be growing anxious for me.

I stepped back close to one of the buildings and paused

for a moment, looking up and down the street to see if by now some one was about who could direct me.

As I hesitated thus, a door above the light opened and a man and woman stepped out, stood for a moment in the doorway and then moved across the sidewalk.

Here at last was some one who could set me on my way, and I was about to ask for directions when the man spoke. At the first words I stopped short and drew back against the building, for the voice was that of Heinrich of Vankle.

"We will get nothing more than his thanks if we give them up," he said in an even voice.

"Will he give in even if we hold them, do you think?" the woman asked.

"He'll have no choice." The man laughed as one who felt he had matters in his own hands.

"He has the power to laugh at us," the woman cautioned.

"Laugh? Aye, let him," the man made answer. "Laugh? God, and he will if he fails to come to my way of thinking. What would Europe say if it were told he'd placed a bastard on the throne and to his own knowledge?"

"You would do that?" the woman demanded.

"Aye, unless he does as I say."

"I'm to keep close to the house?"

"Yes; for he must not know you are here as yet. It will be but a little more than a week now."

"But if he fails to do as you wish?"

"Gad! We'll take the compartment, as the American wouldn't and then 'Pepper Box' can go to hell."

"But would he let us get away?"

"He'll not dare to stop us. But come, I know him well, and the game will end our way. Either we will stay on our terms or we leave, and then the value of our information goes up—clear up—way up!"

The man laughed lightly, and the two moved forward into the light. As they came on I pressed back, and finding a slight break in the wall between the houses, was able to partly conceal myself.

I quickly pulled my hat down over my eyes and turned up my coat collar. Who the woman was I could not tell, but I resolved to hear what more they might care to say so publicly, and also to find out who Heinrich's companion might be.

I was, however, to be disappointed, for they only stopped in the light for a moment. The man said something in a low voice, and the woman drew back and turned her face away, shaking her head as she did so. She wore a heavy veil and I was unable to see her face at all. The man stepped forward and asked a bit crossly, "Why?"

The woman answered quickly, but I could not catch the words from where I stood.

"In a half hour then," Heinrich said.

The woman held out her hand. He carried it to his lips, and instantly turned back into the doorway from which the two had come.

To his going I paid no heed, for in the lamplight there was a flash, and I recognised on the woman's hand the ring I had picked up from under the car seat on the Chicago train.

For a moment the woman stood pulling on her glove, her eye on the door through which Heinrich had vanished. Then she turned and crossed the street.

I watched her eagerly, the idea of finding my way back to the inn gone. If my eyes had not deceived me, there was work to be done here, and I moved across the street after her.

The night was shutting in, and while this helped conceal me, it also made it easy for her to slip into any of the low doorways without my being able to tell which one.

The fear that she would do so soon vanished, for she walked on rapidly and within a few blocks turned into a more open street.

The houses changed in aspect as soon as the corner was turned, and by the time a dozen blocks were passed the buildings had become less frequent. Another turn and we were on a wide avenue lined with trees. The houses were single villas, set back in their own grounds and quite far apart.

She walked on as if sure of her ground, while I followed, moving as quietly as possible on the turf, ready at any moment to dart behind a tree if she should turn about. In this way we passed two more gateways, and then at the next she turned in and ran up the winding path to a pretty villa standing back among a mass of shrubbery.

I came up to within fifty feet of the gate and then stopped, waiting for her to enter.

In a moment after the door closed lights sprang up on the lower floor, and I made bold to pass through the

gate for a better look at the house and its surroundings.

My inspection made, I started down the walk when a sudden thought struck me. Undoubtedly, if the woman was the one who had secured the envelope from me, she had just arrived, and while she had met Heinrich, there was a chance it had not as yet been turned over to him. If that was the case, she might have it with her even now. Possibly by quick action and a sudden demand I would be able to secure it.

The idea was wild, I know, but I resolved to act upon it without delay, and turning back to the house, mounted the steps and rang the bell.

Instantly the door was thrown open and by the woman herself. Her invitation to enter made me realise I was mistaken for some one else.

Without a moment's hesitation, however, I stepped across the threshold, my face averted and my hat held before it as much as possible.

As the door closed I turned. She gave one cry, her hands flew to her lips, and she stood, her back to the door, staring at me, a frightened look on her face.

For a moment we stood thus, neither moving nor speaking, and I had a good chance to note her features again. She was the one who had been on the Chicago train, the woman on the steamer and, beyond a doubt, as she wore the ring, the one who had secured the papers from me at the Carlton.

"You!" she exclaimed in a whisper, leaning forward.

I nodded.

"You!" the woman whispered again—"you here?"

"Why, certainly," I answered, keeping my eyes on her face. "I trust you have recovered from your accident?"

She smiled suddenly and relaxed her strained attitude.

"Thanks, I have." Evidently she was going to make no denial of the part she had played.

"I fail to see any of the terrible scars I should expect from such a catastrophe," I suggested, smiling.

She shrugged her shoulders prettily. "Has monsieur called to inquire as to my health?" she asked.

"I am rather interested in your welfare," I assured her.

"It is very, very kind——"

"I hope," I put in quickly, "that you managed to keep all your *private* papers intact?"

I hoped to catch her off her guard in mentioning the papers so suddenly, and so get some hint of their whereabouts.

She was equal, however, to the occasion, and only laughed at my question.

"Better than some others did," she answered.

"You have managed to keep your ring," I said, pointing to her hand. "You didn't lose it again, I hope?"

She glanced at her fingers in surprise.

"So that was your guide?" she exclaimed.

I nodded, watching her face closely.

She had regained her composure and was quite at ease.

"Monsieur is lucky."

"May I not hope for an invitation to be seated?" I inquired.

"I fear I cannot have the pleasure. I am expecting a friend."

"Whom you left but now in the Wurtsmurton?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "I am worth being watched?"

"It happened by accident," I admitted.

"It has turned out more to your benefit than some accidents," she replied promptly.

"In the end some accidents turn out better than one expects," I answered.

"We'll hope so with this one."

Then, remembering she had just said some one was expected, whom I naturally supposed would be Heinrich, I resolved to come to the point quickly.

"That envelope," I demanded. "Perhaps before it finally goes to the Duke of Zergald it would be well to let me look over its contents."

She smiled, but said nothing.

"It would be inconvenient if the prime minister of Scarvania was told you were here."

The woman stopped smiling on the instant.

"You would not dare!"

"It might be the best thing I could do, if you fail to return the envelope."

She looked at me as if caught fairly. Then her eyes shifted about the room, and I followed her glance to see if they would rest on any spot, telling where the envelope was hid. I had feared, at first, it would go to Zergald at once. Now I was convinced from her look, and by what I had heard in the Wurtsmurton, that Zergald had not received it as yet. My heart leaped, for here was our chance, if it had not already passed to Heinrich.

"The envelope," I said, my voice growing hard. "Come at once, or I'll call my men in for a search."

The woman laughed again, and I knew she did not

have it with her. Heinrich of Vankle then was our goal.

"The envelope, madame!" I said again to make sure.

But before she could reply a step sounded on the porch. She glanced up at the sound as if to ask were they men of mine. I knew the answer, of course, before the door was opened, so shook my head.

"Ah!" she said with a smile, "the force is on my side."

With that she threw open the door, but blocked the way that she might first speak to him who would enter.

"Allow me to introduce you, gentlemen," she said, stepping to one side in an instant, and Heinrich came into the room.

He stepped forward, a sure, easy smile on his face. His right hand rested in the pocket of his coat, and I had no doubt what it held.

"It's Sir Meddler!" he said, walking up to me.

"To meet Sir Indiscreet!" I answered.

"Indiscreet?" he asked.

"Those documents," I answered boldly. "Would it not be safer to give them to me than to keep them from your chief?"

He flashed a glance at the woman and then turned to me.

"You'll meddle once too often," he said in a low voice. "I'll give you leave to go before I throw you out."

I smiled easily, for I felt the fellow hardly meant what he said.

"But the documents?" I asked. "Shall I tell the Duke of Zergald they are here?"

He smiled at that.

"Hardly to your profit," he answered.

"And why?" I asked, hoping in his answer to gather some information.

But suddenly his manner changed from one of parley to that of anger.

"Damn your questions," he fairly shouted, stepping up to me. "I'll have no one calling at this house, do you hear? I'll——"

"So that's the trouble," I interrupted, looking him straight in the eye. "I assure you I have no desire to supplant you in the lady's affections."

With an oath he whipped out his pistol and pushed it into my face.

"Go! One! Two! Three! Go! or by God, I'll blow your head off as if you were a dog."

"And if you do," I replied calmly, though I feared the nervous finger on the trigger, "you'll find it hard to explain to my chief, the English ambassador."

A question flashed into his eyes, a question of doubt and perplexity.

"You may not have been informed," I added, "but I happen to be an under secretary of the British Legation."

He stared at me for a moment, and then the pistol dropped slowly to his side.

"You lie! You know you lie," he whispered.

There was nothing more to be gained by staying, and so my only thought was to take advantage of his present mood and get away with a whole skin.

"For that we'll settle later," I said, speaking slowly to keep my anger back. "Now get to one side, as I *am* going."

He drew back, his face white, but watching mine intently. The woman moved quickly to his side, and I saw with relief that she slipped the revolver from his hand. Then gliding softly to the door, she threw it open.

As I passed out she whispered in a low voice:

"Before you say anything of this to Sir Charles see me again."

I nodded quickly, feeling as I stepped into the night I had made a discovery, though for the life of me I couldn't tell at that moment what it was.

CHAPTER XIV

PLOUGHMAN AND DIPLOMAT

It had been late when I first saw Heinrich and the woman, whom I had heard him address as the Countess Merdith, and still later when the countess and I reached her villa.

The interview had not been long, and yet it was well into the evening by the time I found myself in the roadway again.

Making sure that I would be able to locate the countess's residence, if need arose, I bent all my energy in a search for a stray cab, and not finding that, to the nearest way on foot to the inn.

My appetite was keen and, besides, I felt I had made at least two discoveries. Of one of them I was fairly sure, of the other I had some doubt. The fact that the countess was back in Zakbar I wished the others to know at once, for now new plans were necessary. Something might be done that very evening toward securing the precious documents.

To my surprise, I found that the countess and I resided not over a half hour apart, and soon the lights of the inn flashed through the trees.

I strode forward hurriedly, resolved to have a bite to eat before I set out again, if we should decide something could be done that night.

That the woman had slipped into Zakbar with the

papers was of vast importance, and I determined the princess should be apprised of the fact, and by me personally.

I turned off as I came through the park and took a side path; there were many of them that wound through the shrubbery, so that I might come out at the rear and enter from the balcony that opened off my rooms.

I had no doubt Karl and Kurlmurt were there, kicking their heels in impatience and wondering what had happened me.

What Kurlmurt would say when I told him his spies had let the woman get by them I could well imagine.

As I came on under the trees, I looked up and saw some one standing on the balcony gazing out toward the lake. At first I thought it was Karl. Then I saw it was a woman.

My heart gave a bound, and I made forward quickly. No one could mistake that figure. Why the princess was at the inn and on the balcony off my rooms I could hardly imagine. Yet there she stood, and I was to see her again. That was quite sufficient.

I think she heard my step the instant after I discovered her, for she turned and peered into the darkness as I came forward.

When I drew near enough to speak, she leaned down over the railing.

"It's you!" she said eagerly. "You're safe."

"It's I surely," I answered, "and quite safe."

"We feared something might have happened," she said in an eager, relieved voice.

She did not say what they had feared, and I did not

ask. It was quite enough to know she had thought of me—had been anxious for my safety.

"Where are the others?" I inquired, running up the steps.

"They've gone. When you failed to come Karl grew worried and started out to hunt you. Kurlmurt let me know, and when I came he also started."

"How long have you been here?"

"An hour, perhaps."

"Then Kurlmurt's message came before you dined?"

She nodded.

"I've missed mine as well," I said, getting down to practical things at once. A craving for food took possession of me, and too I grasped at the possibility of dinner tête-à-tete with her. "Let us have a bite to eat and I will give you the news."

"Then there *is* news?" she asked eagerly.

"A good deal—some plain, some vague. I'll tell you the plain part first. Perhaps in that which is not so clear you will see the meaning I've missed."

We had a table laid on the balcony, and I told her of my adventure while we dined and waited for Kurlmurt and Karl to return.

She was less disturbed to learn the documents had reached Zakbar than I had expected. Her first concern seemed to be for me, for as I finished the anxious look in her eyes vanished.

"It is a wonder Count Heinrich took your intrusion so lightly," she said, a smile lighting her face.

"He *was* a bit put out," I admitted. The incident of the pistol and his threats I had failed to mention.

"Then the documents are not yet in Zergald's hands?"

"I think not," I said. "From what I overheard in the Wurtsmurton I am very sure the countess has given them to Heinrich, and he is keeping them from Zergald."

"But why?"

"If Prince Joachim is crowned they might be of considerable value to such a man as Heinrich of Vankle."

"But if Prince Joachim is not crowned?"

"Heinrich loses. He will beyond doubt favour Joachim."

"Holding such evidence I imagine he will," the princess said with pretty sarcasm.

"Let me give you some sugar," I suggested, as the coffee was served.

She burst into a merry laugh as she held up her cup. "It seems positively ridiculous," she said, "that we should be talking of matters that are so serious in such an off-hand way."

"I wish they would return," I suddenly exclaimed as I began to think of action, now that my stomach was satisfied.

"Why?" the princess exclaimed with a pout. I suppose she felt I should be quite satisfied with present arrangements, as I assuredly should have been.

"I thought of making a call," I answered in an off-hand way, as if my first remark had not been a bit *mal à propos*.

"A call?"

"Heinrich has the envelope."

"I see," she said, looking at me and nodding to my request that I might smoke.

"The original plan is of no avail now."

"Heinrich would be a hard man to get it from."

"He must be persuaded to change his allegiance."

"You don't think—" she started to ask.

"I think that with such a man money will go a long way. Or possibly other means can be found."

"Both Kurlmurt and Karl should be back before this. They said they would return if they did not find you at once."

"If they don't hurry we may lose a great chance."

"To-morrow will do as well," the princess suggested, leaning back in her chair.

"If they are much later we will have to wait until to-morrow, though I hate any delay," I agreed.

"How will you go about it?" she asked, leaning half across the table, her arms folded under her perfect chin.

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's either money or force," I said. Then I stopped, remembering the request of the countess as I came out the door. That was the discovery I had made which was anything but clear. I resolved to see if the princess could make the matter out.

"Do you know of any reason why Heinrich of Vankle should care to stand particularly well with the British Legation?" I asked.

"I can't say that I do," the princess answered. "Why?"

I told her of the Countess Merdith's request that I say nothing to Sir Charles of the incidents of the evening before seeing her again.

The matter seemed to puzzle the princess as much as it had me.

"Sir Charles was a great personal friend of my father's.

Otherwise it would seem to indicate that he was in some way connected with the affair."

"It looks so, if it were not impossible," I agreed, "and as if they feared I might tell him of my discovery. But what difference would it make if he should know? They can't be fearful he will tell Zergald."

The princess shook her head to all the suggestions I could make, and finally we gave up the matter.

It grew late; Kurlmurt and Karl remained away, so I was forced to give up all idea of seeing Heinrich that night. And then with the chance of immediate action gone we dropped the subject and talked of other things.

The princess asked me of America. The evening was soft; I had broken bread with this woman now seated by my side. Was it any wonder if for an instant I forgot myself as we talked on? For an instant, I say, and it was only for an instant.

A feeling flashed through me that we two sat there in America, not Scarvania. We had just come from the dance, the music I could almost hear floating softly on the air as we spoke of my country.

But it was the very freedom of the thinking that brought me to a realisation of the facts. To think I could so soon after having met her dined thus. The trust and faith she placed in me I felt deeply. Yet she was a princess, I a private gentleman, bent on her service, and so we could not have but come from the dance, even had there been a dance to come from.

The change in mood made me restless, and I longed for Karl or Kurlmurt to come back. Suddenly I saw some one moving in the park near by and turned quickly.

"It's one of the guards," the princess said, following my look. "Lieutenant Barnsmurk is in the hall outside your door and he has three men in the park. My uncle insisted upon it. You see, we did not know but what something had happened you. He felt there might be danger."

"And there was in your coming here?" I said, suddenly realising the facts.

"Hardly as much as in your call on the countess."

"That was really a very enjoyable affair," I said, smiling at the recollection. We had got back to the matter in hand again, and it was as well.

"Then you really love danger?"

I looked at her in surprise, for she asked the question almost eagerly.

"Why no," I said.

"Then why take it?" she asked.

For a moment I tried to see the meaning of the question in her face, then I turned and looked out over the park, then back at her.

The sentinel passed out of sight, but his presence seemed to say there was real danger, of which she asked if I had a pleasure in partaking.

But the reason that I looked at her and then away, then back again, was because she had given me a chance by her question to tell her truly why I liked this danger and took it.

And then as I was about to answer her in a way I'll not set down here I remembered Karl had told me there was danger in the matter long before I met the princess. So, of course, the answer that I would have made could not

have been the reason I took it at all. And yet I must make some answer, so I said:

"For the sake of turning the furrow straight after once getting my hands on the plough."

At my words she sprang to her feet.

"Ah, you are a diplomat as well as a ploughman!" And then she stopped, hesitated and went on as if almost angry at me, "And I'll try at least to be the latter."

I looked at her vaguely, she spoke so suddenly, and then before my slow brain could catch her meaning there was a step on the gravel, and she called out that Kurlmurt and Karl were returning.

As I rose to watch them coming forward under the trees, Karl caught sight of me and waved his hand. The princess stood by my side and waved a welcome back to them.

"I knew he could care for himself," Kurlmurt growled to Karl as they mounted the steps.

"Yet he's had an adventure," the princess declared.

"The papers are in Zakbar," I said.

They both stopped where they were and stared open-mouthed at me.

"And the woman?" Karl demanded eagerly.

"Is in Zakbar as well."

"How did she get in?" Kurlmurt asked.

I shook my head. I might know that she had arrived, but as to the manner of her coming and the method she employed to pass his spies I did not know.

"Then the game's up," Karl said in more disgust than sorrow.

"Our prearranged programme is certainly a bit *passé*," I agreed.

"Has Zergald the documents?" Kurlmurt asked.

"No."

"You've got them!" Karl exclaimed.

I laughed at his assurance. If Zergald did not have them then I must. That was Karl's reasoning. But before they could ask any more questions I sat them all down and told them what I had already related to the princess.

"Now," I asked as I ended my story, "why does Heinrich of Vankle keep the papers instead of giving them to Zergald?"

"There's money in them for Heinrich," Kurlmurt replied promptly.

"That's what Mr. Converse said," the princess exclaimed, clapping her hands.

"I take it Heinrich of Vankle hired the countess, and now that he has the papers from her he'll tell Zergald there are none," Karl said.

"Or possibly he has turned them over to Zergald, but is telling the woman he has not, so as to put off the final settlement with her," Kurlmurt suggested.

"He's in love with her," I said.

They all looked at me in astonishment. Kurlmurt growled, Karl laughed, but the princess continued to look at me.

"He's been in love before," Karl said in anything but a complimentary tone.

"I don't think he's lying to the countess," I insisted.

"Nor do I," the princess agreed, speaking slowly and still looking at me.

"Well, however it may be, what's to be done?" Kurlmurt exclaimed.

"Call on Heinrich and suggest there is money to be had from us," I said.

"But there isn't," the princess said slowly. "We haven't it to bid against Zergald. He is in full power, and Heinrich can get almost anything he may ask with such evidence in his hands."

"He'll be a grand duke," Karl said.

I saw then the largeness of the stake for which Heinrich was playing.

"If we can't bribe him we'll simply have to take them from him," I said.

"A capital idea," Karl agreed.

"Yes, very capital," Kurlmurt sneered, "but how?"

"Mr. Converse will find a way," the princess said. She said it as if it was settled and needed no more discussing, so much so, in fact, that she looked out absently across the lake as she made the remark.

We all glanced at her in some surprise. What Kurlmurt or Karl thought of her words I cannot say, but I know I undervalued the confidence they indicated in the wish that I did know a way.

And then as if to end the discussion, Lieutenant Barnsmurk came through the room, saluted and handed me a note.

I took it in some surprise, opened it and read the contents in still more surprise.

I turned to them as they stood looking at me, but spoke to the princess.

"Here, perhaps, is the way," I said. "The Countess

Merdith, you'll remember, asked to see me before I spoke to Sir Charles. Well, here's a note from her saying I'm to call to-morrow evening at ten. The interview may result in something."

"Where are you to meet her?" Kurlmurt asked.

"21 Wurtsmurton."

"Wurtsmurton!" Karl exclaimed.

"Yes," I answered, referring to the note. "It's where I first saw her and Heinrich. I'm sure of the street, and 21 should be the number."

"A vile hole Wurtsmurton is," Karl said.

The princess came close to me at that, and as Karl turned to Kurlmurt she asked in a low voice:

"It may be a trap full of danger."

"For Heinrich?" I asked.

"Is he to be there?"

"The countess says she'll meet me alone, and that I am to come unattended."

"Can you trust her?"

I smiled at that and considered for a moment my answer. Then before I could speak she laid her hand on my arm ever so lightly, and asked quickly:

"But if there was danger you would hardly be persuaded not to go."

"Why no," I said, a little surprised at the question. "I think, though, there'll be no danger."

"But if there was you would still be the ploughman?"

"I'd try," I said, "and also to be diplomatic," meaning by that that I would have the countess to deal with, and the interview would by all means require diplomacy.

But the princess seemed to see a different meaning in my words and her face changed.

"Yes. We both must be diplomatic," she said, "and diplomacy is rarely real." With that she turned quickly to her uncle and bade him take her home.

CHAPTER XV

EXIT A TABLE

When I considered what had occurred, I could but conclude there was a great deal to be gained from the coming interview, even if both Karl and Kurlmurt shook their heads and talked of a trap.

"He could have blown my head off last night," I said. We three were seated in Kurlmurt's office in the old castle the morning after my encounter with Heinrich and my tête-à-tete dinner with the princess.

"And he hesitated when you mentioned you were under secretary to the British Legation?" Karl asked.

"And that statement prompted the countess's request that I see her before saying anything to Sir Charles."

"Well, you'll keep your word as to that," Karl chuckled.

"But what can the woman want?" growled Kurlmurt.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"All I know is, she's the one to whom I handed the envelope. She knows Heinrich's plans well enough to speak for him, so certainly she must know the real destination of the documents. Under the circumstances, a talk with her may be profitable. There can be little danger, as they must have an axe to grind somewhere."

"Still I don't like the rendezvous—21 Wurtsmurton"—Kurlmurt protested.

"The countess doesn't like to be seen in the city, I suppose."

"She could have had you come to her villa," Karl suggested.

"Possibly Heinrich is not to know of this meeting," I said.

"You told us he was in love with her."

"But I didn't say she was in love with him."

"Is she in love with you, then?" Karl demanded sharply.

I laughed heartily, though I can't say I liked the inference.

"If she were, I would agree to deliver that envelope to you to-morrow," I answered.

"Heinrich has it, not the countess," Kurlmurt put in.

"Well we'll see," I said. And while the discussion went a bit farther, we very soon dropped the subject.

There was nothing to do but to wait until night, and at the princess's request Karl and I drove out in the afternoon for tea.

Again as we sat there on the terrace they spoke of my coming interview, and Kurlmurt tried to persuade me to take Karl and young Barnsmurk with me.

"But the countess stipulated I was to come alone," I said.

"More need for them to go."

I tried to laugh the suggestion one side, but the older man stuck to it. Finally he appealed to the princess.

"I fear there is danger," she said, speaking slowly, "and I do not like Mr. Converse to go. It is more Karl's place or yours, uncle, but neither of you can do this thing to-night. The countess would only talk to Mr.

Converse, certainly to neither of you—yet she might to me. I have thought of going myself."

Kurlmurt stared at his niece as if he could not believe his ears. I saw her way of looking at it, and resolved to end the matter at once.

"There is no need for any one to go but myself, yet to satisfy you all I'll take Karl and Barnsmurk." And as I said it I gave Karl a nod, for he looked at me in some astonishment. I meant what I said, that I would take them, but how far I had not stipulated. That I would settle later when I left them on the pavement outside No. 21.

The thing, however, seemed to satisfy Kurlmurt, and as for the princess, I realised no sooner had I spoken than she saw through my scheme. However, she said nothing and so the matter ended.

When it began to grow late I rose to go, and Karl and Barnsmurk having got out of their uniforms were ready to accompany me.

Each had a pistol tucked away in his coat pocket, for while I hardly expected danger, I was not going to play the fool and rush in unarmed after the fair warning Heinrich had given me the night before.

Soon we were ready, and a dog-cart waited at the castle door to drive us into town. When we came down the hall the princess met us, and I think she looked lovelier than the night I first saw her, as she stood by the huge fireplace, the light from its flickering log falling on her face.

Karl and the lieutenant kissed her hand as they passed and went on out the door, followed by Kurlmurt, who

linked his arm in Karl's, giving him, I had no doubt, some final instructions as to my welfare.

I stopped, watching the three pass on, and then turned to make my adieu. As I took her hand she looked into my eyes, and I saw hers were full of tears and that her hand trembled.

"They have frightened you quite unnecessarily," I said.

"Be careful," she answered, speaking slowly. "Heinrich is not to be trusted."

"If it makes you feel easier," I answered, "I'm taking no chances. I know Heinrich would do anything, but this time there is little need for fear. The countess has something to tell me, I'm sure. And then, too, they'd not harm an English under secretary."

"You might come by an accident that could not be traced to them."

"I'll take care," I said.

"If it were any use, I would ask you not to go."

"We'll laugh about it to-morrow," I answered.

"No matter what the hour is when it's over, send me word. I will be waiting."

"I'll think of you waiting, and that will make me doubly careful."

"I care little about the papers," she said, her eyes searching mine almost defiantly.

For a moment I gazed deep into her face, holding back by a mighty effort what I would have answered her.

Then with my heart leaping madly I carried her hand to my lips, as had Karl and Barnsmurk, turned and hurried to the waiting cart.

I knew she feared for me because I was on her business,

and for that reason would not have harm come to me. And yet as we drove away toward the city, I felt she knew what I might have said, what my eyes must have told her.

Assuredlly, had she not been a princess—well—I was vain enough then, and am now, to think she took no offence at what there was in my look.

During the drive to the city few words passed between us. I had my thoughts—wild enough ones too—and I presume Karl had his. Barnsmurk was silent because neither of us spoke.

Finally we crossed the Wurtsmurton far up and there stopped.

"I'll go ahead," I said as we got down, "and you two follow a block apart, behind me. You can find some nook or corner near the house to wait. If I don't come out in an hour's time you're to come in."

Karl nodded and Barnsmurk looked at me and nodded also. He knew nothing of the matter, but had simply been told by Kurlmurt to come and obey orders.

Like a good soldier and the brave fellow that he was, he stood prepared to do so, come what might.

I went on quickly and covered fifteen blocks without looking back until I stood opposite No. 21. I knew that my two friends were behind me, ready to follow into anything that might come. But I also knew that the one hour limit, if harm came to me, might as well be ten, except to get me ready for my coffin nine hours sooner.

And yet while I had a thought of what might come of the matter, as I paused to knock on the door, it was really not overmuch on my mind. The old worm-eaten

door was set a step below the level of the sidewalk, but it faded before me as I waited for my knock to be answered, and I saw only a tall girl standing by an open fire.

One side of her face was in the fire-light, the other side in shadow. The high colour in her cheeks, the flash of the eye, the golden gleam of her wonderful hair all stood forth, and it seemed as if my hand could touch hers if I but reached out before me.

My knock was mechanical, and yet the first rap brought me to myself. Instantly I shifted my right hand to my coat pocket and my fingers close on my pistol, while my knuckles fell a second time on the panel. I was not over-confident of the reception I was to receive and believed if my furrow was to be finished, as I was determined it should be, I had best be on the safe side.

Slowly the door swung open, and I stepped back one step to better see who had opened it. A small hall was before me, a narrow hall with narrow stairs on one side, just such a hall as one would expect to see in such a house, but no one stood in the hallway, and yet the door swung back. Realising I must not appear suspicious, I entered instantly, and as I did so the street door swung to.

A strange door, I thought, as I turned and watched it silently shut without apparent agency—a strange door in a strange house where strange things might happen.

A low lamp hung overhead, hardly lighting the hall and narrow stairs which led into the darkness above.

As the street door closed with a final click a door at my

right moved slowly and then swung open, revealing the smiling face of the countess.

"You are prompt!" she said.

"You have strange doors," I answered, taking another look at the front door.

She laughed softly and pointed to a spring in the wall.

"This is not a usual Wurtsmurton house," she said.

"I judge not."

The small room that opened off the hall was furnished as one would expect in such a house. It would have raised no suspicion in any one's mind that No. 21 was out of the usual run.

"You got my note?" the countess asked as she seated herself and motioned me to a chair.

"I did, of course," I answered, declining the chair, but standing with my back to the wall which was between me and the street. No secret door could be behind me there.

"I'll tell you then why I asked you to say nothing to Sir Charles and also why I have invited you here," the countess went on instantly.

I bowed and waited for her to speak again. As I stood there I could but think of this same woman as I saw her on the Chicago train, so eager to see Karl's papers. She leaned forward now as she had then and spoke quickly.

"You saw the effect of your statement?" she asked.

"I did," I answered, smiling slightly.

"Zergald is endeavouring to get Sir Charles to help him in securing a loan through some English capitalists, and I feared you would say something to him of last

night's occurrence, and thus prevent the matter going through."

"You're pretty careful of Zergald's interests," I answered, "when you don't even report to him on the result of your mission."

"That's not a very polite way to accept my explanation."

"I'm afraid that I'm given to blunt speeches."

"Heinrich's interests might be affected if Sir Charles were offended," she exclaimed.

"I see!" I said. "Now really that sounds more plausible. Perhaps, too, you feared if I said anything at all the news of your return might reach Zergald's ears?"

"I don't really think Zergald would be interested to learn of my return," the countess replied with a smile.

"No?" I questioned. "Then perhaps he doesn't know who Heinrich sent to America."

"You shouldn't try to solve every riddle, Mr. Converse."

"There is one I would like you to solve though," I answered.

"And that?"

"Why should I refrain from speaking to Sir Charles?"

"Is it not enough that *I* ask you?" Her smile was full of coquetry.

"I fear," I answered, "I cannot allow my natural inclinations to govern my actions at this time."

"Of course not, Mr. Converse," the countess answered quickly, her whole attitude changing. "But I will tell you why there will be no need for you to speak of last night's occurrence to any one."

"I shall be only too glad to learn how I can keep silent and not jeopardise our interests," I answered.

And then she told me how she had just learned the contents of the envelope stolen from Karl von Merlder. That, knowing the truth, and how such evidence withheld would prevent the princess from coming to her rights, she had resolved to undo what she had done.

At first I was suspicious. I had come looking for a trap, and yet I began to believe in this woman the more she talked.

She had told me of Zergald's endeavour to get a loan through Sir Charles, a fact unknown to any of us. She had no need to tell me of that and much more that she did. And so I accepted what she said and believed in her. Of course, I could not help realising all she purposed doing would affect Heinrich's interests, and far more than my telling Sir Charles of his threat against me at her villa. Yet when she told me an underground passage connected the house where we were and the palace, and that she would lead me through it and to the documents, I was ready and eager to follow her.

I may have been easily persuaded, I may have allowed my desire to recover the papers to outweigh my judgment, perhaps I did. And yet if I did, all I can say is that the Countess Merdith talked convincingly, and I believed her.

It seems to-day, as I review events, I was easily persuaded, easily led. But as I write I have not the countess before me. Her handsome, eager face, her deep eyes, her frank look are not here to add evidence to the statements. Let the man who condemns my over-

confidence and calls me a fool for rushing in as I did remember that. Let him meet the countess once—and she can be found to-day in a certain capital of Europe—it is best to keep track of a few people—and there talk with her. He'll believe what she tells him, or I'm mistaken.

However, why excuse myself? The fact is I bade the countess lead on, and we instantly set out for the castle.

The documents were in Heinrich's room, she said, and all we had to do was to go down the passage and enter by a secret door she knew well.

Taking a candle, we went into the hall and down a flight of narrow stairs. The countess led the way, and soon we were in the cellar of the house piled high with old boxes and rubbish.

From there she led me on through a narrow stone-lined passage, cold and damp. The ground fell away a bit, and we kept going down lower and lower. Then suddenly we came to a flight of steps, some ten in number, down which we passed, to find ourselves in a fair-sized room containing a small pine table and two chairs.

It seemed much like a dungeon and as inviting. For the first time the countess paused and spoke.

"I must leave you here for a moment. A guard is beyond." She pointed to a black spot on the other side of the room, which I made out to be a second opening. "I will have to get him away."

My confidence had already begun to lessen. The long walk through the narrow passage and the request to wait in darkness in a dungeon-like room was

not conducive to trust. Yet I had come so far and could not well turn back.

So I seated myself in one of the chairs by the table and bade the countess go on.

She left me without another word, and left me in as black a darkness as I have ever seen. As soon as she was gone through the archway at the farther side I whipped out my revolver and sat, all nerves keen, listening for the slightest sound.

I knew if I was to be attacked it would be while I waited here, and if I passed through this I could be certain my trust was not misplaced.

How long I sat there listening and hearing nothing but the beating of my own heart I do not know. It was not over ten minutes, and yet in such a place ten minutes were like as many hours.

Then as I began to grow more accustomed to the stillness, I thought I heard a slight shuffling sound at the farther side of the room.

I leaned forward, my pistol ready, and tried to pierce the darkness. The sound kept on, but came no nearer. As far as I could judge, it came from the doorway where the countess had passed out.

Then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun and silence reigned again. For a moment I sat listening for a repetition, and then it seemed I heard the sound of running water, and a slight breeze sprang up where before the air was heavy.

Wondering on this, and listening to find if my ears had not deceived me, I suddenly saw a faint light, but only for an instant, marking the doorway where the

countess had gone out, and then I heard my name called.

I rose instantly, for it was her voice. My vague misgivings fled at once, and I rated myself severely for my doubt.

The light, however, only flared for a moment, so I was forced to grope my way across the room in the darkness. Suddenly I struck the wall at the right of the archway.

As I brought up against the cold, damp stones, I reached out with my hand for the edge of the opening, and then, remembering the countess had gone down some steps as she passed out of the room, I groped my way forward carefully.

Doing so, and gathering myself together, as one is wont when about to go up or down stairs in the dark, I paused again.

I wondered why the countess did not return with the light, and then I heard again the sound of running water, and felt a cold draft about my ankles.

I stopped short, for the blast about my legs was like ice. The sound of running water grew louder, and I tried to make out the direction from which it came. A cold chill suddenly passed over my body as I realised it was directly below me.

With a start my muscles drew taut, for I felt I was standing on the edge of an abyss.

What flashed through my mind at that moment it is hard to say. Quickly I dropped to my knees and crawled forward. I was now in the middle of the doorway. The cold, icy draft blew strong in my face, and the sound of rushing water could be heard far below. I felt out

with my hand and drew back instantly. The steps over which the countess had passed were gone.

As I made this discovery I heard my name called again. It was the countess, and she was before me somewhere in the darkness.

Flight was my first thought and then suddenly another plan suggested itself.

I answered her call and tiptoed back to the table.

"Which way?" I asked.

"This way! Come!" came the answer, and again the light flashed for an instant.

Picking up the table, I made for the archway.

"Come quickly," the countess called.

I answered her from the doorway, and then with as unearthly a shriek as I ever gave vent to cast the table before me into the open gap. Far below a faint splash sounded.

As my cry rang out I heard an answering laugh, and it was Heinrich of Vankle's voice.

"You moved the steps!" shrieked the countess, her voice full of horror.

"Of course I did," came the cool answer in Heinrich's even voice.

"You promised me you'd not harm him," she cried again. "Oh, why did you do it? Why did you kill him?"

They were so close to me that I moved back quietly a step or two.

"You promised me!" she cried. "You promised me!"

Heinrich laughed once more and then called out sharply:

"Stay where you are until I move them back. Stop! You can't help him. Stand still!"

Again came that grinding sound I had heard when I sat at the table.

"The poor fellow's gone!" the countess said.

"To hell!" Heinrich answered with another laugh.

The steps moved back slowly. I took off my hat, dropped it by the archway and quietly stole back the way the countess and I had come.

As I moved quickly up the passage I drew a breath of relief, yet I wondered what Heinrich had told the countess he had wanted of me that meant no harm.

CHAPTER XVI

A TRIP IN THE DARK

As I gained the end of the passage I paused before entering the cellar, and listened to see if Heinrich and the countess were following me.

No sound came to my ears, and I moved on, groping my way among the boxes that littered the cellar floor.

It was pitch black and I did not dare strike a light.

Suddenly from the far corner came a sound, and I drew up sharply, my revolver ready.

Was the way blocked? Had Heinrich, fearing the trap might fail, taken the precaution of barring my exit?

Cautiously I moved toward that point where I felt the stairs led upward. My nerves were on edge, and I stopped like a shot when the sound of some one moving again fell on my ears.

"John!"

It was Karl's voice, and the relief at finding friends instead of an enemy almost drove caution from me.

"Yes," I whispered, and moved across to where Karl and Barnsmurk crouched in the corner.

"We followed you in through the window," he explained. "What's happened?"

For a moment I hesitated, and then before I could speak a dim light flashed in the entrance to the passage.

Drawing Karl and Barnsmurk back with me, I crouched behind a huge pile of boxes, and the next in-

stant Heinrich and the countess moved like ghosts across the farther end of the cellar.

Karl stirred ever so slightly, and like a vice my hand gripped his arm.

"The steps!" Heinrich cautioned. "Be careful!"

We heard them mount to the first floor, their steps echoing in the darkness over loud.

"Well?" Karl demanded as the heavy footsteps of Heinrich sounded on the floor above.

"Wait!" I cautioned. "Let's see what they do."

I was turning over in my mind a plan that had come to me suddenly.

"There," I said, straightening up again. "The street door closed. They've gone."

"Did you succeed?" Karl demanded eagerly.

I paid no attention to his question, but turned to Barnsmurk.

"You'll find a spring in the wall on the left side. It opens the street door. Go! Follow them, but be certain they do not see you."

"Shall I come back here?" Barnsmurk asked.

"Undoubtedly they'll go to the countess's villa. If Heinrich goes in, leave him there and go back to the castle. Tell her Highness nothing has been accomplished. Hurry!"

Without another word he moved silently across the cellar and up the stairs. As the street door clicked after him Karl turned to me, disappointment in his voice.

"Nothing accomplished!" he cried. "Why didn't we stop them?"

I explained quickly what had transpired; how I had

talked with the countess and of the close call in the passageway.

When I told him of the moved stairs he caught his breath and gripped my arm.

"By God, John," he exclaimed, "it was a close call!"

I nodded while a cold chill ran up my spine and I had a gone feeling in the pit of my stomach, so vivid was the recollection of the moment when I discovered I was standing on the edge of the open stairs, where one false step would have sent me to eternity.

"Yes," I said, speaking slowly, "it was as close a call as I ever met with; and once I had a wounded grizzly on my hands and not a cartridge left in my magazine."

There was only one thing I was glad of, and that was to feel the countess had not had a hand in the scheme. Of course, I realised I had been duped, and she had lured me on to fall into Heinrich's hands, but for that I could forgive her. I had heard her sincere exclamation over my fate when she thought I was dead; and, too, she had called me a poor fellow.

I was one, I guess, to be so easily led. That, however, was more through my anxiety to recover the papers than because I was easily beguiled. Such a thought was a balm to my over-confidence.

"And what now?" Karl asked when I had been silent for some time with my thoughts.

"Do you know where the passageway comes out in the palace?" I demanded.

"I've only heard of such an underground entrance. They tell old stories—legends we call them—of a secret

way and a moving staircase. I never knew myself before that it existed. Kurlmurt might help us."

I shook my head. "No time to find him now. We'll have to trust to luck. Heinrich lives in the palace?"

"He has two or three rooms somewhere in that part given over to Zergald."

"Then is it not likely this passageway leads to that very part of the castle? Perhaps it is used by Heinrich and Zergald as a means of getting in and out when they are not anxious to be seen."

"Not at all unlikely," Karl agreed.

"If he hasn't the envelope with him it may be in his rooms somewhere," I suggested.

"If we could get in there!" Karl exclaimed eagerly.

"It's too good to be true," I answered. "I don't count overmuch on our chances."

"But we'd better try?"

"Assuredly!" I agreed, "and let's at it. We are wasting time here."

Karl pushed a small dark lantern into my hand.

"You know the way," he said.

I strapped the lantern to my belt and moved across the room. "We'll not use the light if we can help it," I cautioned. "Have your pistol ready and hug the right wall. There is little chance of our meeting any one, but we'll be on the safe side."

Down the dark passage we made our way, and when we came to the dungeon-like room where I had been left by the countess I flashed the light. It was as I had left it, minus only the table. Making out the door on the other

side, we moved across, and once again I made sure with the light that the steps had been moved back.

Listening carefully, we could hear, as if far off, the faint sound of running water. I pointed the spot out to Karl, and he shuddered. Then we went down five steps and into a part of the passage of which I knew nothing.

Before going farther, however, I looked carefully along the walls on both sides, trying to discover the secret spring that moved the steps. A hundred feet from the steps themselves there was a niche in the wall, and this we searched with the greatest care, for I had no doubt it was here that Heinrich and the countess had waited. Their light had shone faintly for an instant only, and it, therefore, must have been in this spot, for nowhere else could one wait with a light and still be out of sight from the top of the steps.

Finally, unable to find any lever or spring, we gave up the search and took our way down the passage. We went on silently and as softly as we could in the darkness. For ten minutes at least we followed the damp stone wall, and then suddenly came upon a flight of narrow stone steps on the right side of the passage. We paused instantly and listened. Not a sound could be heard except our own breathing. I slid back the shutter to the lantern, and there before us the steps made up into the darkness overhead, but the passage also went on.

"They have been used and lately," I said, turning the light upon them and pointing to footmarks in the dust.

"We had better try them, then," Karl suggested. "We've come far enough to be under the castle."

"And the walls were damp a distance back," I said.

"What of it?"

"The water from the moat," I suggested.

"Then we must be right. Let's go up and see. This darkness has got on my nerves."

Truth to tell, I began to feel ready to start at the slightest sound. Ahead of us and at our backs was a pitch blackness, and as I closed the shutter of my lantern I could hardly tell that Karl was by my side.

"All right," I said; "we'll try the steps."

My foot was on the bottom step when from down the passage ahead of us there came a sound.

I felt Karl grip my arm, and we both drew back a dozen steps from the foot of the stairs.

Silently we waited, crouching low against the wall. The passage must have turned beyond the stairs, for suddenly a light flashed and we saw a man coming toward us carrying a lantern.

I gripped Karl by the arm and we both began to retreat, stepping slowly and cat-like, but keeping close together.

It seemed as if we were to be again driven back when the goal was nearly within our reach.

CHAPTER XVII

A BRACE OF CAPTIVES

The point where we first saw the light and then the man bearing it must have been two hundred feet beyond the stairs. As the light came on we moved away. For our sakes, I hoped whoever it was would take to the stairs, but if he failed to do so I resolved to be as far away from them as possible when we halted him. That I had made up my mind to do, for I did not relish being deprived of the chance to look over Heinrich's quarters when we had come thus far.

We made our way back as the man came on, walking slowly, his head bowed as if in deep thought. His shadow danced ahead of him, the rays of the lantern lighting up the grey arched walls and ceiling in fitful flashes.

As he neared the stairs we both paused, as if by common impulse, to see if he would turn up them or continue. Without hesitation he passed on and came toward us.

When I saw he intended coming on I turned and ran swiftly back in the direction we had come.

"You aren't going to give it up?" Karl demanded, catching up with me and putting his mouth close to my ear.

I shook my head, but of course he couldn't see the motion in the dark, so had to be contented to follow without knowing why I fled so swiftly.

I made for the niche in the wall, where I believed the

spring that moved the stairs must be located, and flashed the slide back from my light.

"Look," I whispered, falling on my knees, "we've got to find the spring and before he gets here."

Karl saw my point, and fell to searching the walls while I went carefully over the floor. Suddenly a grating sound struck my ears and I raised my head to listen. It stopped. Surely the steps were moving, yet as I listened again no familiar sound could be heard. I dropped again onto my hands, and again I heard the sound.

"Throw the light on my hands," I said.

As Karl did so I raised my left hand. The sound went on, a slow, grinding, grating sound, then I raised my right hand, and the sound ceased, while at the same instant the flag upon which my hand had rested moved ever so slightly.

"Put out the light," I ordered, "and get down here!" Then I threw my whole weight on the one flag and the grinding sound began again.

As Karl knelt at my side I began telling him my plans, which up to now I had only half formed as we hurried back along the passage.

By the time I had finished the distant sound of footsteps could be heard distinctly. We drew back into the niche and waited for the one with the lantern to go by and be turned back by the open gap.

The steps came nearer, my heart beating a tattoo in rhythm to their fall; the light flashed across the passage, dancing weirdly on the grey stones, and then the man passed, his head bowed and his brow knit, as if in deep thought.

I gripped Karl's wrist.

"Yes," he answered, "I saw who it was."

"Would it be better if you were not seen? I can handle him."

"No," he answered sharply.

The steps went on and then suddenly paused. For an instant there was silence, and then the man turned sharply and came toward us. When by the light of his lantern I judged he was upon us, I touched Karl's arm, and we both sprang into the passage, our revolvers pointed straight at the head of the Duke of Zergald.

For an instant not a word was said. We stood staring at one another, the duke half stunned by our sudden appearance. Then with a quick movement he cast his lantern toward the chasm.

I saw his intent before he could act and instantly threw open the slide to my lantern.

"We won't remain in the dark, if you please," I said.

"Well?" he finally demanded, moistening his thin lips with his tongue.

"We were doing a little exploring," I explained, "when you interrupted us. We feel obliged to detain you."

"How did you come here?" he demanded, glancing over his shoulder at the open steps. Undoubtedly he could not conceive of our coming down the stairs and then opening them against our return.

I decided to mystify him a bit.

"The stairs are inconvenient opened like that. Would you please show us the way to close them? No? Then sit here in this niche. You must give us your word of honour not to move until we return."

"And if I decline?"

"We'll be obliged to keep you here by force."

"Don't accept his word," Karl broke in suddenly. "He's not to be trusted."

"When I get out of this it will not be possible for any one to trust you, Count von Merlder," Zergald said, a hiss in his tone, as for one brief instant he shot a glance at Karl and then turned his eyes again upon my face.

"Wait 'till you're out of it before you make threats," Karl replied.

"What do you say?" I asked.

"We've no time to lose," Karl protested, "and his word's no good, so tie him up and be done with it."

"You may do as you like," Zergald replied shortly.

Without another word we began binding Zergald's hands behind his back.

The prime minister made a wry face of it when we removed his coat and ripped it into strips. But we had nothing else to tie him with, and certainly it was no time to be particular. As an extra precaution, we placed a gag in his mouth.

I had much rather he had given us his word of honour, for I felt a bit of repulsion in treating him so. Karl, however, seemed to take rare relish in the task, and I left the tightening of the thongs to him, sure the knots would be well made.

Before we tied his feet we led him to the niche, made him sit down, his back to the wall, and thus left him in as comfortable a position as possible, under the circumstances.

His keys we borrowed, in the hope they might help

us in our search for the papers. Then we took our way back along the passage.

We passed the stairs where we had first caught sight of Zergald. The passage went on for three or four hundred feet, turning sharply to the right fifty yards beyond the steps, and there ended in a blank wall. Though we hunted carefully for a door, none could be found.

There was, of course, some reason for Zergald going to that part of the passageway, but we failed to solve the secret in the short time at our disposal, and hurried back to the stairs, anxious now to look for the papers and to be content with those, if we found them.

The stairs were narrow, but ended in a fairly wide landing. Three sides were stone, but the fourth was a thin wooden panel. Against this we pressed our ears. Not a sound came from the other side, and satisfied we were on the right track and that no one was beyond, we began to search for the spring that opened it. This was a far easier task than we had expected, and in an instant the panel slid back, disclosing the four bare walls of a small room.

The sound of measured footsteps fell on our ears. They came from the right and passed away; then they came back again, passed the door and went on toward the left.

Beyond a doubt the door opened into a hallway, and the footsteps we heard were those of a sentinel.

For an instant we considered what was best to be done. The sentinel—the even footsteps up and down, up and down, convinced us it was a soldier on guard—must be got out of the way before we could hope to move farther.

"Can't we attract his attention?" Karl whispered.

"Attract his attention?" I questioned. "That's what we don't want to do."

"Get him in here," Karl explained, "and tie him up as we did Zergald."

I removed the lantern from my belt and put out the light. Then as the footsteps drew near, coming down the hall, I rattled the slide on the lantern.

It failed to draw his attention and he passed on. As he returned I dropped the lantern to the floor and kicked it gently. The steps stopped instantly. Again I rattled the slide, and in an instant the man moved close to the door. Another rattle of the lantern and the door knob turned ever so slightly while I moved close to Karl's side to be behind the door as it opened.

Another shake of the lantern was necessary, and then the door slowly swung back and we heard the fellow step over the threshold.

The open panel in the wall caught his eye instantly, and with a muttered oath he stepped across the room. We watched him, fascinated. All his interest was centred on the opening, and he never once glanced about him.

Karl silently swung the door closed and placed his back to it, while I moved quickly across to the soldier's side.

His head was stuck through the opening, when the cold barrel of my revolver touched his neck. With a cry he wheeled, to find my hand gripping his shoulder like a vice and my revolver close to his face. Karl on the other side of the room also had him covered.

"Not a sound," I cautioned, "or you're done for."

"By the Blessed Virgin!" the fellow cried.

"Silence!" I whispered sharply, pressing the muzzle of my pistol against his forehead. "Keep quiet and no harm will come to you."

Quickly we took his gun and small arms from him, and with his belt and gun strap made him fast.

Before thrusting a gag into his mouth we asked for directions.

"Count Heinrich's rooms are across the hall," he answered; "the first door to the left opens into his sitting-room."

"How many rooms are there?" I demanded.

"Two. The bedroom is beyond and there is a door from it into the hallway on the other side."

The door designated by the sentinel as opening into Heinrich's sitting-room was locked, but the bunch of keys secured from Zergald helped us out.

Slowly we turned the bolt and entered. We relocked the door and then struck a match and relighted our lantern.

The room in which we stood was large and elegantly furnished. On the farther side a door hung with heavy portières could be seen, and we instantly made for it and passed into Heinrich's bedroom.

Making sure the door from the bedroom to the other hall was locked, we turned back to begin our search, starting with the sitting-room.

Just as we reached the portière-hung doorway a sound from the next room brought us to a stand. With a snap I closed the shutter of the lantern and we were again in pitchy darkness.

"It's at the door!" Karl whispered.

Before either of us could move a key was fitted into the lock and the bolt thrown back. The next instant a cheery whistle fell on our ears—a few lines of a song. There was no need for either of us to speak, for the voice was unmistakable.

A match was struck and the next instant the sitting-room was a flood of light. Heinrich stood in the middle of the floor, a happy smile was on his lips, and I marvelled at his coolness and good spirits so soon after arranging my death, as he supposed.

Nothing more clearly showed the disposition of the man.

"Cover him with your pistol," I whispered.

Heinrich had crossed to the table near the fireplace and was leaning over, selecting a cigar, as I uttered a deep voiced moan.

With a start he looked up, the cigar still in his fingers. His glance flew about the room as if he were uncertain from whence the sound had come.

I knew he was not one to be fooled for long, so calling him by name I threw aside the portière and stepped into the room.

With an oath his hands flew up before his face and he shrunk back against the table.

"In Michael's name!" he cried, "who are you?"

I said nothing, but stood waiting, my hands behind my back.

Slowly his arms came down from before his eyes, and he straightened against the table.

"Alive?" he questioned in a hoarse whisper, "Alive?" And he leaned forward, still keeping his hand on the table to steady himself.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN INTERRUPTED SEARCH

"Yes, alive," I answered, throwing up my arms and covering him with my pistol.

Karl moved quickly to my side, his revolver levelled also.

"Alive!" Heinrich whispered again—"Alive!" And then, as he saw I was flesh and blood he took heart.

"You gave me quite a start," he admitted, catching a deep breath and forcing a smile to his lips, though his face still held its ashen hue and his eyes never left me for an instant.

"Hands up!" I ordered sharply, as I saw a look of cunning come into his face and his fingers moved ever so slightly toward his hip pocket.

"One! Two!" I snapped as he hesitated an instant. Then his hands went up high over his head and Karl relieved him of two revolvers.

His claws cut, I drew a breath of relief. We had Heinrich under our thumbs at last; and thus the situation, if anything, was improved, as we could now make a thorough job of the matter.

"May I?" Heinrich asked, starting to lower his hands.

I nodded, watching him closely and a little undecided how to proceed. I questioned whether it was best to demand the papers outright or try conciliatory measures by a bribe.

"Thanks," he said, dropping into a chair and picking

up the cigar he had let fall to the floor. "I feel better." And he stretched his long legs out as he calmly struck a match on the table leg.

"May I ask," he began, as he blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, but I cut him short.

"You may ask nothing." His indifference in some way nettled me and my anger flew up on the instant. "I've a mind to put a bullet through your head and end your cursed work—a murderer in heart."

"There's no use arguing," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "You've got the upper hand and it's got to go your way just now."

Heinrich could be cool and calm to indifference, no matter if he were losing.

"There certainly is no use in arguing," Karl put in. "Finish the cur and be done with it."

Heinrich turned his head slowly and looked once at Karl.

"Come," I said, for I saw Karl flush under the glance, and I did not care for Heinrich's death on our hands if we could help it, "you know, I suppose, what we want?"

"I?" Heinrich questioned, displaying the greatest wonder in his voice. "Not I," and he slowly shook his head.

"We've got you," I said, "just about where the hair's short. We'll stand your company for five minutes. At the end of that time you turn over that envelope."

"Envelope?" Heinrich questioned. "I haven't it."

"You lie!" Karl answered him promptly.

"We'll tear this room of yours to pieces if you don't give it up," I counselled.

"And if we fail to find it," Karl added, stepping close to Heinrich's chair, "and you still refuse to produce, I'll personally put a bullet into your head. With you out of the way Zakbar will be well rid of a dirty scum, and the hiding place of that envelope can be buried in the grave with your damned soul."

"I haven't it," Heinrich insisted.

I took out my watch. Three minutes passed, and I announced the fact. As I did so Heinrich took his cigar from his mouth and eyed me curiously.

"You ought to let well enough alone," he suggested.

"For instance?" I asked, willing he should talk, if he cared to.

"Why, you fool," Heinrich answered, his eyes narrowing, "the princess loves you, and you can——"

"You cursed cur!" I cried, throwing myself upon him. "Damn your foul mouth! I'll stop your—" and my fingers closed about his throat.

So suddenly had I sprung upon him that he had no chance to even move, and his head flew back against the chair with a crash.

My anger was beyond control by now, and I fear to think what would have happened had not a sharp knock on the hall door sounded at that instant.

Karl sprang across the room while I left off choking Heinrich and grabbed up my pistol.

"Keep quiet!" I cautioned as I laid the muzzle against his head. He had hardly regained his breath from my choking him and made no effort to move.

The sound of many voices came from the hall, and again a knock echoed on the door.

"Heinrich, are you there?" came the demand, and in the voice of Zergald.

Karl shot a glance at me full of question. How could Zergald have got free?

"The boot is on"—Heinrich started to say when I pushed my pistol against his temple again. The mark of my fingers on his neck told him I was in no mood to be trifled with, and he made no attempt to finish his speech.

How Zergald could have got free I was at a loss to understand. But now the more important question was what we should do. It seemed we were trapped, for with the Duke of Zergald we could hear at least a dozen men. Our chances on the instant seemed pretty slim. If we were caught it would go hard with us, for if nothing more came of Zergald's wrath we would surely rest in one of his secret dungeons until after the fifth. It behooved us to get clear and give up the hope of securing the envelope, no matter how little we might care to be driven back again. Certainly the princess's cause would be as good as lost if both of us fell into Zergald's hands.

"Heinrich!" again demanded the duke—"Heinrich, are you there?"

Suddenly a thought came to me that our only chance was in getting the hallway cleared, thus opening a way for us to leave as we had come.

"Answer him," I whispered.

He shot a glance at me and hesitated.

"I'll give you one second to do as I tell you. One slip and I'll not hesitate," and I touched his temple with my pistol.

"Halloo!" Heinrich called.

"Is that you?" Zergald shouted. "Open the door."

"I've lost the key," I whispered.

Heinrich hesitated again, and I touched his temple once more with the cold steel.

"I've lost the key," he called.

"Mine are gone, too," Zergald answered, and then demanded, "Have you seen them?"

"Seen whom?" I whispered.

"Seen whom?" Heinrich repeated.

"That crazy American and Von Merlder."

"That's who I must have in my bedroom," I whispered.

Heinrich closed his lips tight, for I think he partly saw my purpose.

"Lie!" I whispered again.

"That's who I must have in my bedroom," Heinrich repeated, looking calmly into the barrel of my revolver.

"You've got them?" Zergald fairly shouted. "Let me in! Let me in!"

"The key's lost, I tell you. Go around with your men to the other hall and break in the bedroom door. I can hold this side," Heinrich answered with my prompting.

"What's that?" Zergald demanded.

"Again!" I whispered, "or I'll finish you, and no waiting."

"Hurry!" Heinrich called. "Take your men around to the other hall and break in the bedroom door. I can hold this side."

We waited breathlessly to see if Zergald would do as he was told.

"Hurry!" Heinrich called again on my order.

"Is that side safe?" Zergald demanded, hesitating.

"Damn it, yes," Heinrich shouted back, losing patience

and answering of his own accord—"safe as hell. Go on! Hurry!" and under his breath, "Safer all around with you gone."

Assuredly it was safer for Heinrich with Zergald gone, for if the duke attempted to hold the hall our first necessity would be to end Heinrich, thus reducing our opponents by one, for a fight would naturally follow.

Heinrich, I think, finally realised his safety as well as ours depended upon his getting Zergald and his men away, and so his last answer had more of a ring of sincerity in it.

Certainly it convinced Zergald, for the next instant an order sounded and we heard those in the hall go tramping away.

As soon as I was sure they had started I seized Heinrich again and forced him back into his chair.

"The envelope!" I ordered. "Give it up!" I knew we had but a few minutes' grace and resolved if possible, to accomplish our purpose.

"I haven't it," Heinrich answered sullenly.

"Karl," I called, "look through his pockets."

While I held him Karl made a search, but to no avail.

"Kill him if he doesn't give it up," Karl cried.

I shook my head. "I'd rather he had them than Zergald."

"You've got a long head on you," Heinrich said with a laugh.

"Kill him!" Karl urged again. "We've no time to search."

In truth we had not, for as he spoke blows began to fall on the bedroom door.

"See if there's any one in the hall," I said, for now we needed to look to our own skins.

Karl hurried to the door, opened it cautiously and passed out.

"All clear," he cried.

"Get the other one opened and be quick," I shouted back.

As Karl stepped into the hall I turned to Heinrich.

"Hand it over and I'll guarantee you will be well paid."

"I haven't it," he insisted doggedly.

I studied his face, but for the life of me couldn't tell whether the fellow was lying or not.

The bedroom door creaked and splintered. Nothing was to be gained by putting Heinrich out of the way, unless we could get the documents by so doing. Once more I offered a fair price. Heinrich shook his head but smiled.

"I'll call on you and talk it over. That kind of a deal takes time, and just now—" he shot a glance towards the bedroom—"you can't well stop overlong."

"By God! you have it, then," I cried, listening.

"I have not, but might lay hands on what you want. I'll come and talk price to you soon. You'll have to pay well, though, for your fingers on my throat raises their value."

I hesitated a moment, glanced at the breaking door in the bedroom and backed a step toward the hall.

"Wait!" Heinrich called, springing from his chair and grabbing up a scarf. "Tie me up. I can swear you got out after they left the hall. Thanks!" he added as I bound his hands behind his back. "Now knock over a

few chairs. Good! I'll be on the floor when they come in. Fire your pistol twice, lock the door after you, and I'll not seem so much like a liar. Have to keep up appearances with the old fool, you know." He laughed gaily as though we were both bent on the same errand.

The bedroom door, cracked and torn from its hinges, fell into the room as I sprang backward into the hall, firing my pistol. Karl pulled the door to and turned the key.

We were on the run now, for they might attempt to follow, but stopped long enough to lock the door from the small room into the hall and also to close the panel.

Down the narrow stairs we hurried, and once in the passageway we lost no time.

We feared that Zergald would have a guard somewhere to block our exit, so went on, our revolvers ready.

The steps we found in place. Up these we rushed, through the small room, and on up those on the other side and down the passage to the cellar. Up into the hallway of the house we made our way with more caution. No one waited to block our right to pass, and at last, our breath nearly spent, we gained the street. No richer were we for our pains, except to know we had added fuel to the fire and a personal score to the quarrel, which both Zergald and Heinrich would be only too glad to repay.

Yet the night's work might still bear fruit, if Heinrich kept his word and gave me a chance to bid for the papers.

CHAPTER XIX

A PLEASANT RIDE AND A POLITE P. M.

From the Wurtsmurton Karl and I lost no time in reaching the inn. It was early morning, and while we were both wide awake I counselled sleep, for I felt the next day would be a strenuous one. We had, so to speak, thrown down the gauntlet, and I for one had an idea Zergald would not hesitate for one moment to pick it up. Certainly he would want to know what we were doing in the castle, how we had learned of the secret passage, and why Heinrich's rooms were our object point.

I trusted Heinrich to throw him off his guard and not allow him for one moment to think we were after the evidence of Joachim's birth. To that end Heinrich must work in accord with us.

If he still held the envelope—and I believed he did for all his denial—he would not want Zergald to know he had it, under any circumstances.

To satisfy the duke, Heinrich must have told him before this that as yet the spy sent to get the documents had failed to return. As long as he held to his purpose we had a chance of securing the envelope again, if we were ready to pay his price. But once let it pass to Zergald and our chances were as good as gone.

The real harm done by our search and its failure was that it gave Heinrich fair warning we were prepared to

risk a good deal to recover the evidence of Joachim's birth, and, therefore, he would take extra precautions to safely guard it from now forth, barring the possibility of another attempt at robbery, and assuring a heavy price, if it came to a question of purchase.

The bright sunlight was shining in at the windows of my bedroom when I at last shook off the vague misgivings of a troubled dream, full of strange jumblings. First I was falling down a deep flight of stairs that seemed to be under me, yet giving no firm footing. Hilma kept calling me to come back, but I was forced on by a tall, laughing-faced monster, truly fascinating, who kept dragging me downward, while a thousand grey-bearded Zergalds peered out of the darkness with fiendish grins upon their faces.

Karl was somewhere near, but I could not see him, until suddenly a flash of light burst upon the scene and I stopped falling. Hilma danced away, waving her hand, but calling no longer to me. And there before me stood Karl by the window fully dressed, while I sat in the middle of my bed staring sleepily at him.

"Nine o'clock," he announced when he saw I was awake.

In an instant I was out of bed. A cold plunge and a quick shave and I had on my clothes, ready to sit down opposite Karl for a hearty breakfast, which he had ordered as soon as I began to dress.

"Well, last night was a good deal of a fizzle," he said with a forced smile on his lips, as he began upon the fruit.

"I agree. Yet what more could we have done? I take it we were pretty lucky to get away."

"We were. It's a strange thing no one was left in the passage to stop us."

"Don't you believe," I asked—for this very thing had puzzled me—"that only Heinrich and Zergald know of this entrance? If a guard had been placed there it would have divulged a secret up to now only known to these two. Besides, he counted upon getting to the castle in time to catch us before we could get away."

"He must have worked loose, closed the steps, and come around by the street," Karl added.

"That's how it seems to me," I agreed.

"He won't dare to take any official notice of the thing," Karl went on. "He'd have to admit too much himself."

"Assuredly!" I answered. "But what I fear most is that we have added a personal enmity that will be hard to check. Zergald will not quickly overlook our treatment of him, nor, for that matter, will Heinrich soon forget the choking I gave him."

"No," Karl answered slowly, looking at me in a strange way.

I wondered suddenly if he remembered the words of Heinrich's which had prompted my anger.

"Well, it's done for now," I went on, "and we had best see Kurlmurt at once and let him know what has occurred; also find out about the loan."

Karl nodded slowly.

"Zergald and Heinrich will be more determined than ever to hold the documents, and, too, to get us out of their way. I'm afraid it is to be a far more serious matter than I thought. I should have left you in London."

"If you had I would never have forgiven you," I answered promptly.

"Well, I suppose so," he said, speaking slowly, again looking at me in a peculiar way.

"We had better see Kurlmurt at once, and find if he knows aught of this loan Zergald is trying to make," I urged. But Karl simply turned to the lake, saying nothing. His thoughts seemed to be far away, and I doubt if he heard at all what I said.

When he turned again he looked at me vacantly, as he had before. Finally he spoke.

"Possibly it would have been better for you if I had left you in London."

I looked at him sharply, for there was something in his tone I hardly understood. He spoke as if he were groping for his words, almost as if he were speaking aloud, not realising I was there. He might have had something on his mind—something he was not quite sure of—something that was just beginning to make an impression, faint and vague, and he was trying to frame the thing in speech. A child hearing a new expression might repeat it thus, and try as it spoke to make out the meaning of it.

"For you, yes," he went on; "for us, no. Such things come quickly. It's not strange. You would be the very man. I don't wonder at it."

I sat back in my chair and put down my cup.

"What in the world do you think you are trying to say?" I demanded, a fear gripping my heart that he had stowed away Heinrich's remark and had been pondering over it all night.

"I'm saying that it's not strange you two should come to care, and so quickly."

He said the thing quietly, as if the sense of his disjointed words had suddenly struck him in their true meaning.

"I think you are talking wildly," I said. "Do you take any stock in the words of that cursed rascal?"

"I don't blame you, and I don't think I blame her," he answered, speaking as if the thing were settled. "No, I'm not speaking because of what Heinrich said"—he looked at me steadily—"but because I know. His words only showed me some one else had noticed what I thought I saw. They simply confirmed my suspicions."

I sat struck dumb. That I might have let slip some sign I did not doubt, but the princess? Never! Karl was day-dreaming, and I told him so with a laugh, trying to turn the subject one side as a trifling thought, not worthy of serious consideration. But he would not be stopped so easily.

"I'm not condemning you, John," he said; "I'm not asking any question, only—" he paused to let his words sink in—"only you'll have to go."

"What!" I cried—"now?"

"You should," Karl answered, and I saw in his face what it cost him to speak so, "and avoid all this danger."

"I'll not run away from the danger that may come from Zergald or Heinrich," I answered quickly.

He looked at me a moment. "No, I don't suppose you will, and I'm selfish enough to want you to stay and finish this thing. But the other—when we get those documents then you must go."

This, then, was why he spoke. To tell me what I knew—that I would have to leave as soon as she was crowned. I had no thought I could continue in Zakbar, but he, I suppose, put it to me thus bluntly, so I would be ready when the time came.

I nodded, looking him over as if he were a strange animal.

"We'll finish the matter first," I said.

"Then you'll have to go," he persisted, as if he was bound to settle the matter then.

"I'm no fool or meddling idiot!" I answered with some anger. I resolved, now he had brought up the subject, to settle it once and for all.

"John," he said, leaning across the table and covering my hand with his, "I know."

It was my turn to show an understanding, and I nodded.

"There," he said, pointing to the lake, "is what might have been you."

I followed his gaze, and near the shore floated a broken pine table.

"A subterranean river," he mused. "I suppose it comes down from the mountains, runs under the castle and so into the lake."

"You go and see if Kurlmurt can tell you anything about this English loan," I said, feeling in no mood to take any interest in what might have been my fate. "I'll go see Sir Charles and find if the countess told me the truth."

I found Sir Charles at home, and soon learned that the countess had not lied to me on one point, at least. Zergald, it seemed, was endeavouring to get a loan from

certain English capitalists. From what I had heard of the duke's other financial dealings, I felt justified in assuming he was trying in this way to ebb over strained money matters until after the coronation.

I took the liberty of advising Sir Charles to go slowly, although Zergald was pressing for an instant arrangement with an advance. I agreed also to get him more definite information of the actual state of affairs. I could not, of course, say too much before seeing Kurlmurt, but warned Sir Charles to be careful in the matter.

When I got back to the inn I ordered a horse saddled, leaving word that I would be back before a great while if Karl or Kurlmurt should call. I rode for perhaps an hour, and at the end of the time was as troubled in mind as when I set out. What Karl had discovered as to my feelings made me feel uneasy. Not that I cared because he had guessed my secret, but rather because it would make matters in a way less pleasant. Before his friendship for me would, of course, come his care of Hilma, and I wondered if I should not, under the circumstances, leave at once.

The thought of leaving had the effect of driving my mind back to the task in hand.

What to do now, after our failure of the night before, perplexed me. We had to my mind made our try and failed. Heinrich, if he had the envelope, would guard its contents now as never before, and I could not well see how we could make a move that would with any surety lead to its recovery. There was, of course, his promise to call upon me and discuss a sale, but in that I now placed little confidence. To my mind, he had men-

tioned it only because I had suggested the thing, and without any idea of considering such a move at all.

I was walking my horse slowly, turning over and over in my mind one scheme and then another, each apparently as hopeless as the other, when the bushes on my left snapped suddenly, and I looked up with a start to find the princess before me.

She was mounted on a superb chestnut, and sat her saddle like a born horsewoman.

I reined up, my pulse leaping; all brain-racking puzzles gone in my gladness of heart at sight of her.

"I wonder," she asked with a merry laugh, "if you are riding for a reason?"

"Possibly!" I managed to stammer for all my surprise at meeting her so unexpectedly. "It's a fine exercise."

"I thought that perhaps after last night's adventure you had come out to steady your nerves."

"Steady down my nerves?" I questioned, perplexed.

She nodded, a smile on her lips as she looked at me from out those wonderful eyes of hers. "It was an adventure, was it not?" she demanded.

"Why would you call it one?" I questioned, wondering how much she knew.

"Because Karl would tell me nothing," she replied positively.

"So Karl would tell you nothing?" I asked, thankful he had been so discreet.

"He absolutely refused, and because *you* had not given him permission," she pouted. "How long since, Mr. Converse, have you taken it upon yourself to give orders concerning the information I should have?"

"Did he tell you I had forbidden him to speak?" I asked, laughing with her in her mock seriousness.

"No; but it amounted to the same thing, for I could get no information. Now, I want you to tell me what did happen."

"It's not really necessary to know what happened," I answered. "There's only one all important point."

"The recovery of the documents?"

"The recovery of the documents."

"Still," the princess persisted, "something must have happened, or Karl would have answered my questions."

I couldn't well contradict or continue to make a mystery of the thing when, in fact, there was really nothing of which to make a mystery; so I told her simply that I had seen the countess, learned of the English loan Zergald was trying to make, and that beyond a doubt, Heinrich had the envelope either on his person or in his apartment in the castle.

"Then you practically narrowed down the possibility of it being elsewhere by learning what the countess told you?"

"Exactly!" I answered; "and I came out this morning for a ride to decide again what I decided before, that there are but two ways open to us—either bribe Heinrich or steal the envelope."

"How will you steal it?" she asked.

"The passage that leads from 21 Wurtsmurton ends in the palace," I answered, speaking half to myself. "We might try to get in there again, though the chances now—" and then I stopped short, realising what I had said.

"What passage leads to the castle?" the princess asked quickly. Her eyes were fixed in a quiet scrutiny of my face, and I fear I flushed guiltily, for I saw I had committed myself, when I had not intended telling her how Karl and I had attempted a search of Heinrich's rooms.

"There is a secret passage, I understand, from 21 Wurtsmurton to the palace," I replied lamely. Of course there was no good reason why I should not tell her the truth, and yet I hesitated, out of fear of alarming her. Nothing was to be gained by dilating on our failure or letting her know we had possibly still more aroused the anger and enmity of both Heinrich and Zergald.

"I really think, Mr. Converse, frankness suits you far better."

"But, your Highness—" I protested.

"I know—in fact, I felt when Karl refused to tell me anything that you had met with danger. Now I know it, and I think it would be kinder if you would tell me."

The princess spoke the least bit as if she felt I was not treating her fairly.

"What I failed to tell you," I answered, resolved at once to tell her *nearly* all, "is of little importance. I did not for a moment conceal any facts."

"I would like to know what really transpired."

"Well, I met the countess, talked with her in 21 Wurtsmurton, and she agreed to take me by this underground passage to the castle, where she said the documents were hid."

"But why did she do this?"

"Because she was anxious to do nothing to keep you

from being crowned. She claimed not to have known the contents of the envelope when she stole it."

"I see!" said the princess. "She was laying a trap for you."

I didn't ask why she thought that, but went on with my story.

"We went down the passage far enough to convince me it led where the countess said it did. Then she left me, ostensibly to find if a guard was in our way, but I suspected a trick, and before she returned caught her voice and Heinrich's far down the passage. I think they must have spoken overloud, not realising I was within earshot of them."

"And then," the princess asked as I paused, considering for an instant how near I had come to actual facts.

"Then," I said with a laugh, "I ran away, not caring to meet Heinrich and possibly a half dozen of his followers."

The princess turned and studied the distant landscape for some minutes.

Some way I had a feeling she did not accept my explanation, but before I could well tell what might be her thoughts, she turned, and I saw that her face was flushed and her lips trembled.

With a quick movement she leaned over, it was not far, for I was riding close at her side, and laid her hand for an instant on my wrist.

"Be careful," she said in a low voice, so low that I could hardly hear her, close as I was. "Do be careful."

I felt the hot rush of blood mounting to my temples, and while I have no doubt I was paler, if I changed

colour at all, I felt afire. There was a great deal in the words, more in the way they were said, and yet still more in the look on her face.

Could it be what Karl had said to me that morning on the balcony was true? I forgot the warning in his words, remembering only that he had told me she cared.

How did he know? Had she told him or had he simply made a guess? Such questions I failed to answer. At the moment I felt her two words, "Be careful," were a confirmation of his statement.

Now I knew why she had listened to my tale as she had; why her breath had been almost stilled as I told of my small adventure, and why when it ended she had turned away.

In that brief moment she had conquered what she might have said, and turned only to say, "Be careful."

Yet her eyes, her tone, her face told me more. But what of it! In the glad rush of the discovery I was carried away for one brief moment, and then as the sound of an approaching carriage struck my ears, the thought that had been mine often before came to me again. She a princess, I a private gentleman. Yet for one instant, as she bade me take care, our eyes had met. And then perhaps it was my nerves or a movement of my horse, her fingers tightened the least bit upon my wrist.

But be that as it may, our eyes met, and I think she saw in mine what was there, while I was vain enough to think I saw an answering look in hers.

And then the carriage which we had heard approaching swung around the curve in the road, and we both looked

up into the very much surprised face of the Duke of Zergald.

He shot a sharp glance at us, his eyebrows went up with a start, and then a broad smile came over his countenance as he bowed low.

"A most polite prime minister," I said, wondering much at his pleasant mood, when surely he had good cause to feel anything but charitable, considering our last meeting.

CHAPTER XX

AN INVITATION TO WED

When I reached the inn again I flung myself from my horse and went to my rooms, troubled in mind.

Karl had told me Hilma cared, and then, lifted on the wave of his admission, confirmation had come in her look. Was it any wonder I had allowed myself to show that which I had sworn I never would admit except in my own heart?

And still with all my questioning, with all my censuring of myself, there was a gladness in my breast hard to still.

She cared! She cared! Why she cared—you see there was still the little gnawing thought she only cared because I was on her business—did not matter. It was enough to know I had found favour in her eyes, and her words, "Do be careful!" were a song of joy ringing in my ears.

She had asked it—and why? Because she cared; because I was something more to her than Karl, Kurlmurt or those who were numbered as her helpers. It was a thought that filled my heart to overflowing.

I stood there at the window of my room, looking out across the lake. The sunlight danced in my eyes, the picture took on a hundred new colours, and I seemed to be lifted above myself, and all because she, one woman in a world, let gladness leap from her eyes in answer to the gladness in mine.

Then, as always after great elation, came the reaction, and I began to see this thing in its true light.

Before my coming her task was hard enough. What had I now made that task?

Oh, the remorse that was mine with that thought! I upbraided myself for a thoughtless servant who ill serves the one he would spare all pain.

If I had kept my own counsel, if I had let no look go forth, if I had hardened my heart, if—but why if! if! if! The folly of my reasoning was clearly shown by the thought that it was necessary for me to show my heart to make hers beat to its rhythm.

It was a long battle that afternoon, a final hard engagement after many sharp skirmishes. And then at the end I laid down to myself the law. No further slip must be allowed. I had come for a purpose. To do that and that alone was now my task.

Oh, the folly of we mortals! Is it possible to order our feelings about, tune our heart beats, or say when hot blood and mad passion shall arise? Oh, the folly when the tinder-shell is lighted! Folly in our acts, perhaps, but greater folly in attempting to keep hid the flame, that will, like murder, out.

Yet I issued to myself an edict. Did I rebel against it? Did I say I had a right to tell my love to her, princess or no? Did I swear one moment that I would, and that we would go together and find our happiness while Scarvania crowned whom it could? Did I laugh and feel she would be crowned, but in my heart and on my throne? Aye, I did, and much else. Yet in the end I looked into my mirror and told myself I was dealing with facts, not fiction.

Had I been weaving the thing in the fancies of my own brain I could have turned some tricks, done something, and thus found a way out. But now I had stern reality to deal with, and I calmed my rebellious self as best I could, accepting Fate.

And Fate is right. I might have said I'd carry Hilma off, yet what did happen would have been no different. Fate would have ended the game as it did. When events are cast and moving, move on they will. There is no other way. The long arm reaches out and sweeps you in, carrying you on to what will be. Let a man do his best, plan in the right way, and he comes into the arm's grasp more gently, that is all.

And while I was thus settling matters with myself, and tuning my mind to the acceptance of Fate's decree, Karl and Kurlmurt came stamping in upon me.

We three turned then to safer questions, though, truth to tell, there was nothing much we could plan to do. Kurlmurt felt we had made the attempt, and because of its failure we were done for. He shook his head, too, when he heard of the treatment Zergald and Heinrich had received at our hands.

"Not that you could have done less," he agreed, "only we will hear from this thing, and it won't be long."

"But how about Heinrich's offer to come and see me in the matter of a sale?" I asked, more to cheer Kurlmurt than because I took much stock in the thing.

"I put more faith in the grand dukes themselves, if we could but bring them to our side."

"If we could," Karl agreed, as if we spoke of the impossible.

"Well, we may gain something in that quarter yet," the older man answered quickly. "I'm to see Alvermurk within the hour. You'd best come with me," he went on, turning to Karl. "We'll meet again in two or three hours at the princess's castle."

"Agreed," I answered; "and I trust you'll get some encouragement from this quarter when all else looks rather black."

"Black is the word," Kurlmurt growled.

"But wait," I put in hurriedly as they were about to leave. "How about this loan?"

"The only bonds that could possibly be pledged have no true value," Kurlmurt answered. "If Sir Charles knew the actual condition of our finances, now that Zergald has matters in his hands, he would not consider the thing for a moment."

"He's to get the bonds placed, I believe, simply as a matter of courtesy," I said.

"The least courtesy extended Zergald the better," Kurlmurt growled as he stamped out, followed by Karl.

They had been gone but a little while, and I was considering making another call upon Sir Charles before our meeting at the princess's, when my waiter came to the door and asked if I would see a gentleman who had called.

The way he put the request struck me as odd.

"What is the name?" I demanded.

"He refused to give his name, sir, but says his business is most urgent; that he must see you."

"What does he look like, then, if he refuses to give his name?"

The waiter shrugged his shoulders.

"He is in his carriage at the door, sir, and I have not seen him. His servant waits for an answer."

With no little curiosity, I bade him tell the servant, if the gentleman must see me, I was within.

I was naturally a bit suspicious, and shifted my pistol quickly to my coat pocket as I waited.

In less than five minutes the waiter returned and threw open my door, admitting a short man with a heavy grey beard, which hung well down on his chest. Though it was warm, he had his coat wrapped about him and his hat pulled down over his eyes.

I had hardly expected to see any one I knew, yet my caller surprised me the more, because I should have been unable to recognise him even had I known him, so little of the face was visible. The turned-up collar and the soft hat pulled well down over his eyes, together with his full beard, completely hid his countenance. I was on the alert instantly.

Until the door closed and the lock clicked he stood just inside the room, neither moving nor speaking, while I waited by the table, unconsciously recognising his desire for silence until the waiter was out of earshot.

With the closing of the door, however, he stepped forward, lifting off his hat and grey beard at one and the same time.

"You must pardon my little masquerade," the Duke of Zergald said with a smile.

I had expected something unusual, but I had not counted upon the Prime Minister of Scarvania appearing quite so suddenly, and certainly, considering our recent treatment of him, in no such good humour as he

seemed to enjoy. Zergald never smiled, winning or losing, as did Heinrich.

"Celebrities have all privilege," I answered, mastering my astonishment as well as I could.

"It might raise a question or idle gossip if it were known I had called upon you," the duke explained as he laid his hat on the table, his beard in it, and turned down his coat collar.

I agreed, and readily, for now that I knew who my caller was, a hundred questions were flashing through my mind.

"One can never be too careful," he went on to explain.

"Not when one has underhand matters that won't bear too close examination," I replied.

"One can speak plainly with you, Mr. Converse. It makes it so much easier."

"Plain speech failed us once before."

"I think we understand each other quite well."

"Then you gave up the compartment?"

"I didn't know but what you'd change your mind," Zergald said with a smile, and then added: "But now I understand I might just as well have let it go."

"Just as well," I agreed.

"Yet you risked a good deal."

"No more, I presume, than I am risking now."

"I mean, as long as you remain here you are risking a good deal," he answered.

"And is it to tell me this that you have called?"

"Partly. I realise you wouldn't care to leave just now, and yet I think possibly you can stay without any objection on my part."

"I am pleased to think you have come to such a conclusion," I said a bit sarcastically.

"There is only one condition, however," he added.

"And am I to be advised of that?" I asked.

He nodded his head slowly, and his cold, steel-grey eyes narrowed as he studied my face.

I knew we could never agree, and that beyond a doubt we would come to far sharper blows before we got through. Even now I felt sure if I failed to see things his way, he would use every means to get me out of his path. Yet I liked him for all that. He was a fighter, one who could give and take and ask no favours. Turned into other paths and set right upon his feet, he would have been a mighty likable person, and one you would have followed to the ends of the earth.

I wanted to smoke, so pushed my cigars and cigarettes across the table with a nod, while I lighted a cigarette myself.

"I haven't a doubt," Zergald suddenly went on again, "but what you have planned to remain here until after the coronation."

"Such are my intentions," I said.

"I suppose so. Now I think it would be as well if we both agreed on a certain procedure in this matter."

"For example?"

"Prince Joachim, of course, will be crowned on the fifth of next month, and yet I am frank enough to say I expect some little trouble from the grand dukes."

Here was news for us, and I pricked up my ears eagerly. Could it be that Zergald had already heard of the discontent for which Kurlmurt had hoped?

"One or two of them," he went on, "may think her Highness should be crowned. It would be a very popular movement and take with the people, and some men are such fools they can see no farther than the end of the nose of public approbation. A man to-day will yap and howl the vilest nonsense for a little applause. It's surprising what fills the minds of some."

"And if such a movement took place, the people might rise and demand the princess as their queen," I suggested, paying no attention to his moralising.

"Hardly," he replied. "The people are slow to start. Cold steel has a very quieting effect."

"And you control the cold steel?" I suggested.

"Exactly," he said with a smile; "a fact, by the way, you seem to have overlooked." His smiles made me think of a wounded tiger about to spring. When he didn't smile one could like him.

"But," I asked, wishing to learn the reason he had called, "what is to prevent the grand dukes from taking such an attitude?"

"Not grand dukes," he corrected, "but a grand duke. Certainly not more than one or two."

"Well, then, one or two," I agreed.

"Even one is not desirable," he said. "I want perfect accord in crowning Prince Joachim."

"I fear you are not likely to get it," I answered.

He leaned over the table, crossed his arms and rested his chin upon them. His eyes narrowed and his heavy eyebrows came down so that he looked out from under them with a strained stare.

"Mr. Converse," he began, speaking slowly and never

taking his eyes from my face, "you are the one who has made me all this trouble. With you out of the way, the others—pshaw!" he snapped his fingers, "they are nothing."

"I fear you underestimate your opponents," I answered calmly.

"I do, do I? Not I. When I cross steel with a man I find out what he is first parry. That's why I sent for you the day after you arrived, to find your mettle. Now I know what you are. I could kill you! Oh, not openly, of course. That under secretary appointment was quite clever. But still, I could kill you! That, however, I don't really care to do."

"Thanks!" I replied, slightly amused.

"Thank yourself, not me," he said shortly. "You're a fighting man, and I hate to put such a one out of the world, there are so few. That's why I've come here to-day. If I can draw off your opposition I have every reason to let you live."

"And how do you expect that opposition to be removed?" I inquired, mildly interested.

"If the princess could *not* be crowned then there would be no use in any opposition," he said, measuring each word as if he wished to be sure he made no slip in such an important statement.

I waited for him to go on.

"And there is one way to accomplish that. It can become impossible for her to be crowned." He spoke in a low voice, watching my face closely.

I supposed he referred to some custom of which I knew nothing, and while I had no idea of the princess not

being crowned, I asked what he meant, anxious to learn his schemes, so to better circumvent him.

"And how is that?" I demanded.

"By marrying under her rank," he said quickly.

Still I did not understand him.

"I'll see that she gets all the fortune her father lost before his death if she should," the schemer said, speaking slowly and never changing his position or his scrutiny of my face.

"Marrying under her rank," I questioned.

"I met you two this morning," he reminded me, and then suddenly I saw his purpose, and my face flushed.

With a spring I was on my feet and pointing at the door, but Zergald never moved. He simply raised his head a bit, like a huge cobra, and smiled diabolically.

"Does the plan strike you so very disagreeably?" he asked.

My teeth clinched, my fists closed and I gathered myself to spring upon him; but before I could move he went on, still speaking slowly, in a voice that had an attention-compelling tone.

"I met you two to-day. Say what you will, I'm no fool and know. Wait!" he ordered sharply, raising his head and sitting straight in his chair. "I know you've not said a word to her—I think I know a man of honour when I meet him."

In an instant by this bold stroke he had placed the thing where it was discussable, and I was forced to hear what he would say. Until he stepped again beyond the bounds I must treat him as my guest.

"Now," he said, leaning forward again, "why not end

this thing? Joachim will be crowned, no matter what is done." His jaws snapped sharply. "I'll give her the money her father had."

Suddenly the humour of the thing struck me. There was as good reason to laugh as grow angry.

"I suppose you think this money would be an inducement?" I asked.

"It would make the matter easier. I've explained that to her. She'd then have a fortune as well as you. She would feel better to marry under those circumstances."

"You've explained to her?" I demanded hoarsely, throwing myself half across the table and almost into his face. "What do you mean?"

"I can't see her, but I've written her, suggesting exactly what I have said to you. I've told her I should see you. You could not speak of it to her—I understand that—but I could and have."

I was thunderstruck at the cool audacity of the man. To get the princess out of the way, he suggested she should marry me. It had, I suppose, struck him as the simplest way to settle the thing.

And, too, I give him credit, as I know the man, that he would have honestly preferred to see her happy, provided it did not interfere with his plans. It was a very simple way of clearing up his difficulties.

"You've more damned audacity than I believed any man capable of," I answered, my anger growing each moment that his cool, sneering face was before me and I pondered on his suggestion.

I think he realised he had gone too far, for he rose slowly and began to replace his beard.

I watched him, fascinated. The change in his appearance was remarkable, and I could hardly feel that it was Zergald himself before me. As the face changed my hatred for it seemed to die down.

He put on his hat and turned up his collar slowly. Then he stepped over to the door, and as he put his hand on the knob paused and looked at me again.

"The compartment would have meant safety. This will be the same. Of course, I know you do not fear personal danger, but let me tell you this: Your death will not remove the princess from my path, but your marrying her will. If you fail me in this, if you fail to remove her from my way after I have put the matter fairly before you both, and made it possible, you're more fool than I think, and," he paused, turning the handle of the door, "fools deserve to die, and die quickly."

CHAPTER XXI

THE HARDEST TASK OF ALL

Zergald's steps died away and silence followed, yet I stood there by the desk, one hand on the corner.

Whatever feeling of anger there was gave way to that of astonishment, and then I laughed. Zergald's disguise, the heavy grey beard, the last grand eloquent speech almost made the thing seem like *opéra bouffe.* The ridiculousness struck me instantly. And yet, seeing the ridiculousness, I realised the serious side of the matter.

Fool! I called myself, to let my feelings be so plainly read. Yet who would have supposed Zergald's carriage would swing around the corner of the road at such a moment. No wonder he had bowed and smiled so politely, for assuredly this scheme had flashed through his mind on that instant.

And then while I cursed him for his impudence and laughed at his false whiskers, I admired the cunning by which he thought to remove the princess so easily from his path.

Did it mean he had the papers? Assuredly, if it meant anything, it was that he did not have them, and fearing they might be in existence, or some evidence to prevent Joachim from taking the throne, he strove by any means to get the princess out of his way.

Well he counted without his host, for instantly I began

to plan the more to circumvent him and see Hilma crowned.

Yet for one brief moment I allowed myself to picture his idea as succeeding, and for once I was ready to admit the losing side had its advantages. Yet what did he take me for! A knave to come in one guise and act in another? Did he think I'd take his bait? The temptation was great, yet I hated the man for the suggestion.

It was while I was allowing myself to consider the possibilities of such a thing that another knock came at my door, and I looked up, expectant and ready for any surprise.

It was, however, only a waiter with a hurried note from Kurlmurt, saying he would be a little late in meeting me at the princess's, that afternoon. It hinted, however, that there was some news to be expected.

I had little to do until it was time to leave, yet more than enough to occupy my mind.

My principal thought was the necessity of so schooling myself, that when I did meet Hilma, I would let no hint slip that I had seen Zergald, and that was uppermost in my mind when I alighted at the castle, about five, and asked for Kurlmurt.

He had not come, neither was Karl about, and so I turned toward the terrace on the right to wait until one of the two should arrive.

I had hardly moved a dozen paces along the path when a servant called me back to say her Highness wished to see me.

I was shown into a small library off a side hall, which led through to the left from the main one, and there,

seated before an open fire, her cheek resting in her hand, sat Hilma.

I could see but a little of her profile, yet I felt the look on her face as she studied the fire before her. Her hair, living lines of golden brown, looked deeper and richer than ever in the side light from the large window at her right.

She wore an evening gown, and the clear skin of her throat and shoulders seemed carved from pink-tinted ivory. It was a picture that made me catch my breath, and my heart leaped. I could have stepped forward ever so little to where I might have had a better look and stood there watching her forever. The lines were true; so true I felt a single alteration could not be asked.

Suddenly she raised her head, realising some one had entered. It seemed that I had been waiting overlong, when in reality we had hardly stepped inside the door when she looked up.

Then the servant mentioned my name and withdrew.

Instantly she sprang to her feet and greeted me.

"Kurlmurt has not come, but he may at any moment. Before he does I wish to speak to you alone."

I felt that it was coming and my hands clinched.

She led the way back to the open fire, and as she seated herself again I held my hands to the blaze. It was warm enough, yet I felt my flesh grow cold and a nervous tremor pass over my body.

As I studied the fire I knew her eyes were upon me, yet for the life of me I could not turn. I dreaded what was coming, dreaded it as I cannot remember ever having dreaded anything before. How such a subject could

be discussed I was at a loss to realise. How I could looking into her eyes, speak of Zergald's suggestion, and not pour forth my heart I did not know.

And then as I stood there hesitating she spoke. She told me simply that she had the prime minister's note, and presumed he had called upon me, as he had said he should.

It was done so simply that it took the embarrassment out of the thing.

"Yes," I answered as I turned; "he called upon me."

"I knew you could not speak of it," she said, looking up at me with a calmness that told plainly of the deeper emotion she felt.

"Understand," I began, "I was carried off my feet by the audacity of the man. He made his suggestion in such a way I was powerless, and then he was in my room."

"Yes," she answered slowly. "You could not, of course, have killed him there."

"Is there," I said instantly, "any need of going further? He expects to gain his end by this trick, and expected me, the poorest compliment ever paid a man, to fall into his trap. Cannot we say the matter is settled?" Already I felt I could not go on and yet hold to my resolve.

"Is it settled?"

She asked the question calmly, watching me all the time. Of the two, she was, I am sure, far the cooler.

"Is it settled?" I repeated.

"Yes, is it settled? Is not what Zergald proposes the only thing to do?"

"The only thing to do!" I repeated again, hardly believing I could be hearing rightly what she said.

"It seems to me the only thing to do."

"But it's impossible!" I protested.

"We both care," she answered slowly. Her eyes never left my face, but rather opened wider and held my gaze with a beseeching look.

"Do we?"

"Yes," she answered, her tone so low I could hardly catch the word. For the first time she looked away.

For a moment I was struck dumb. Why this admission, and so calmly? What prompted it and why did she feel that it was necessary to so freely confess her love? Then suddenly a thought came to me and I turned cold as ice.

"You can't marry me," I answered almost roughly.

She looked at me again. "Why not?" she asked.

"You know why," I answered, speaking slowly and steadying my voice.

"I know what you would say."

"You're to be crowned on the fifth."

"Am I?"

"You know you are. Am I to marry the Queen of Scarvania?"

"No; but I'm not the Queen of Scarvania!"

"You will be."

"Not if we are married before the fifth."

"What about your duty to your people?" I demanded.

"My duty to my people is not as imperative as some other duties," she replied, speaking slowly.

Thus she confessed the gnawing fear in my heart. This

was why she was so ready to marry me. This was the reason I was told she cared. A great anger surged in upon me—that I should be made an object of pity. Was I not able to care for myself that a weak woman must make a sacrifice of herself to shield me?

Almost any words might have passed my lips, but I turned suddenly and strode over to the window, in an effort to control myself before speaking.

And then pity for her took the place of my anger. She was not to blame, but this cursed thief, who would steal not only her throne but her honour.

"This trick of Zergald's," I said, and in a voice so cold I hardly knew it for my own, "to make you think you must do this thing to save me—oh I know," I cried, as she attempted to interrupt me, seeing that I had guessed the truth, "I know— He's told you that unless you do this thing I'll be killed—that you must marry me to save my life—that I've come a stranger, to help you, and now having placed myself in a bad position you must give up all—must marry me. Am I not able to care for myself, think you? Am I one to ask a woman to give her life, her body to me because some sneaking scoundrel says he'll cut my throat? A pretty picture, you marrying me to save my life. You throwing yourself away because my neck is in danger! Danger—the threat of a coward! But you," and I strode forward to her side, "to be placed in such a position. I'll kill him for daring to humiliate you to such a point!"

And then when I might have said more my eyes saw a new look in her face, and I knew—oh the gladness of it—that I was wrong. Zergald had made his threat

but that had naught to do with her offer of herself. It was, perhaps, the prompting, a new reason why she would do this thing, but, above all else, there was the call of her heart. It spoke to me in her eyes, in her face, and then from her lips.

"John!"

She spoke the name softly, and I was swept off my feet.

She stood there before me, her bosom rising and falling, a flush on her cheeks, her eyes bright and holding mine. God knows I meant to be strong, but that one word, my name, was too much. The look in her eyes called me, and I sprang forward and seized her hands.

What stopped me there I know not, for as I moved I would have taken her in my arms, but something seemed to hold me from her, and I dropped on my knees, pressing her hands to my lips.

"You know I care, too," I cried.

"Yes, I know," she whispered, "and you know it is not because of what he wrote. You saw it on my face to-day before we met him."

Before we met him—Zergald! In those words our duty cried out again. Against him we were matched, and how easily—how gladly had we fallen into his trap. Curse the man for a clever schemer. He must have guessed how easy it would be to move us on this line to do his wishes.

Again I rose, cold, mad with longing, but without a word or look walked back to the window.

"Do you realise," I asked, making my voice cold and relentless, "what we came near doing? We—you and I—have a duty."

"John!" she cried wildly, the more so because she saw the truth in what I said, "John! I care not, it is our happiness—that first."

"Kurlmurt," I said without looking about.

"No! No! I'll not think of him. John!" she came close to my side as I stood staring out at the trees, not daring to turn. "John, if he had not sent the note or seen you this might not have happened. Yet each of us would have known even if we had not spoken. Fate willed that you should come to me and that we should learn to love each other. Fate willed that he should write me and see you after learning our secret. Shall we turn against Fate?"

"Would you make me out a scoundrel?" I demanded almost roughly. I could not speak gently and keep my hands from her.

"I would make you my husband."

"I came here with Karl von Merlder to do you a service. Would I do it, think you, if I carried you off when I could have made you queen?"

"But you cannot make me queen."

"Then if I fail let me fail fighting."

"But if you try you'll not fail."

"God knows I will not, though I would," I answered.

"I will not be their queen. John! John! I want you. I care not for the crown, I never did." Her hands were on my arm, her voice pleading. "You have come to me and made me love you, and Fate has made it possible for us to speak. If it had not happened so I would have done my duty, but now I will not. You shall not make me."

There was a longing and pleading in her voice that nearly drove me mad. Yet I knew here, if nowhere else, must I be strong. Slowly I turned and faced her; gently I took her hands in mine and led her back to her chair.

"Hilma, my princess," I said, speaking slowly, and using her name as she had mine, "let us speak of but one thing. The first night I was here you and I walked where an old man used to walk. We looked where he had looked; we saw what he had seen, and now we must ask for his eyes again. I love you, love you as I never thought I could love any woman. Never have I known what it was to feel as I do toward you; never until that night you gave me welcome to your country. Then you made me your subject. Let me be your subject still. The grand old man would tell you this, if he could again offer counsel. I have set myself a task. You and I will drive a straight furrow, and I will crown you for your people; but still you'll be my queen."

"But," she protested, looking up into my face and clinging to my hands, "let us wait. We need not decide this now. Later you may——"

"No," I answered, for I did not dare to let the question go unsettled, "we must decide now. Never again can we speak of this thing. Tell me that you will always be my queen, and I will swear allegiance to none but you."

As I spoke I dropped to my knees at her side, and taking her hand, pressed it to my lips.

"Hilma, my queen!"

She leaned forward and, taking my face in her hands, looked into my eyes long and earnestly.

"You are brave," she said, "braver than I." And then

she leaned forward and I felt her lips touch my forehead.

"The only subject I would have," she said.

I sprang to my feet, my heart leaping at her caress. For one instant I stood there staring down upon her. Then when it seemed as if the blood in my veins would burst I tore my gaze from her face, and wheeling, turned back to the window. I could not keep my resolve longer and look into her eyes. Yet I felt she had not given in, but meant to strive for her way, and hoped to win by leaving the matter unsettled. I knew then that my determination was giving way; that we must not leave the room with the question open.

"You must tell me that you are content," I said without turning.

No answer came. I spoke again, still Hilma remained silent, and then suddenly I heard a step in the hall and a knock on the door.

It was a servant announcing Kurlmurt and Karl.

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT MUST BE MUST

Hilma had turned as the servant opened the door and now stood watching it close as the man withdrew.

The interruption had made me forget for an instant, and then as steps sounded, coming nearer down the hall, I spoke quickly.

"You must see this matter as I say. Your father would have had it so."

She turned and looked at me slowly. Her eyes had lost their fire and I saw that her lips were pressed tight, yet she made no answer. Then the steps reached the door and it was flung open as the two entered.

Kurlmurt was all aglow with news, and hardly waited to give us greeting. Karl was excited, and for their ardour I was truly thankful, for it concealed from them any embarrassment we might have felt.

"I find some of the grand dukes almost ready to question Joachim, and Alvermurk anxious to lead the opposition," Kurlmurt exclaimed, turning to Hilma. "They fear Zergald, of course, but the danger to the state if Joachim is crowned has become apparent to them, and they are nearly ready to revolt."

As he spoke I saw the princess grow pale, and her hand reached out and grasped the corner of the table. For an instant I thought she would fall, and while I did not move from the window where I stood, watching the thing as if

it were some scene in a play in which I had no part, I was ready to spring to her side if she should faint.

For an instant she swayed; then steadying herself, she looked up into Kurlmurt's face for the first time.

"Yes?" she questioned.

I was watching her intently, hanging on each word, and then I saw that Karl was looking at her too, noting her strange actions. He turned and glanced at me with a question in his eyes, but I made no sign, only glanced back at him for an instant and turned again to her.

Kurlmurt, however, went on talking rapidly, not noting that the princess failed to receive his news with the joy he should have expected.

"I had a hint from Alvermurk yesterday," he went on, "but before I saw him I would not speak of it, for fear of accomplishing nothing, and so only disappoint you. But to-day Karl and I have seen him and talked with him. I have not mentioned the evidence as to Joachim's birth as yet, but from what he tells me it will only be necessary, if the documents are not found, for you to go before the grand dukes and demand your rights."

"It would mean a revolution," the princess said slowly, speaking almost mechanically, and so low that both Karl and I strained our ears to catch the words.

"Never!" Kurlmurt exclaimed. "The dukes consider all applicants the day before the coronation. Of course, it's an ancient custom, merely formal, but if you go there and demand your rights, declaring Joachim illegal, we can count on the grand dukes sustaining you, I am sure."

"It would mean a revolution," the princess replied again.

I saw she was simply thinking of some way to combat this new turn affairs had taken.

"The people are for you, your Highness!" Karl exclaimed, speaking for the first time.

"There will be no revolution!" Kurlmurt answered almost angrily as he began to note Hilma's strange lack of enthusiasm. "If Zergald finds the grand dukes against him—and Alvermurk promises me that many can be counted upon—a movement once started, he will give up. It's only necessary to show some force behind your claim besides Karl and myself."

"Go before them in the name of your father," Karl suggested.

"Yes," Kurlmurt agreed eagerly, seeing at last that for some reason she must be persuaded, "and they will rally to your aid."

"It would mean a revolution," she repeated for the third time. Her face was white as death, and I feared to think what was in her mind. Beyond a doubt she was steeling herself to refuse to be crowned at all.

We all stood looking at her. Wonder grew on the faces of Kurlmurt and Karl at her lack of enthusiasm in their newly discovered ally to her cause and the chance it opened to us.

"The papers will be found," I said suddenly, realising some one must speak, "and then the grand dukes will have no choice."

"The papers will not be found," the princess said, speaking sharply and turning upon me with anger in her eyes. She meant, I suppose, that I was not to find them, but if I did, I was to destroy what I found.

I started to speak, for surely this thing could not go on longer. Karl and Kurlmurt would be asking questions in a moment that could not well be answered, for certainly they must have no hint of what was in her mind. But as I would have spoken Kurlmurt interfered.

"If the papers are not found you must go before the grand dukes and demand your rights."

The princess turned upon him then and drew herself up proudly. She looked a queen, if ever woman did, and while my heart beat high in the pride of her, my breath caught, for I saw what she was about to do.

"What! Must! Who says I *must* do?" she demanded, her eyes flashing.

Kurlmurt stepped back as if stunned; started to speak, but stopped, words failing him.

"What must be must!" I said, stepping forward suddenly and speaking sharply.

She turned upon me, a flush coming to her pale cheeks, and for an instant we faced each other. Anger sprang to her eyes, but I held her gaze, and then tears came in place of the angry look.

Kurlmurt and Karl stood staring, first at Hilma, then at me.

"What must be must!" I said again, but more gently.

"Aye," Karl said with a breath of relief, yet not knowing that he spoke.

She looked into my eyes for an instant, an instant that seemed ages to me, and then the tears that had hung on her lashes flooded her eyes.

"You are all against me!" she cried. "But if—if it must be then it must," and she turned away as if weak and lonely.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PRICE OF A ROGUE

Already the city had taken on a holiday air. Bunting and flags with Joachim's face upon them were to be seen everywhere, while the streets grew more crowded as the town filled with those coming to see the crowning of their king.

On July fourth—I could but think if we succeeded it would be a fitting way to celebrate the day—the grand dukes would decide who was to be crowned on the fifth.

While this acceptance was a matter of form, it was still necessary. Whether we recovered the envelope or not, it would be at this meeting, the day before the coronation, that Hilma was to make her claim to the throne. Luckily for us, it was impossible for the prime minister to move the day ahead, for here it was the first of July.

Zergald beyond a doubt feared the rising wave against him and dreaded that at the last moment Hilma might come forward with the fatal evidence. Unquestionably, Heinrich was assuring him no such evidence would be produced by us, declaring, of course, we had none. Such a report could only make the duke feel we had outwitted his spies, and really had the documents, for he well knew there must be some evidence of Joachim's birth.

Then, too, his last move to place matters where the princess could not ascend the throne, no matter what trans-

pired, showed clearly he had grave doubts of the ultimate outcome.

We too were placed where, as the time grew shorter, action was demanded. The securing of the documents would alone guarantee the successful outcome of our plans. If the princess had to go before the grand dukes and present her claim, without any evidence of Joachim's birth, it would, at best, be a doubtful undertaking, the success of which would depend solely upon the strength of Zergald and the following Alvermurk secured.

It was thus, on the first day of July, four days before the coronation, that events began to move rapidly toward a climax.

That morning, about ten o'clock I was sitting on the little balcony off my rooms at the inn. Karl had just left me, and we had but finished our daily bout with the foils. The need for a strong wrist was likely to occur at any moment, and so we had each day crossed blades, until I prided myself on my newly acquired skill.

For some time after Karl's departure I sat watching the lake, of which I seemed never to tire, and studying the grey towers of the old castles on the farther side, when suddenly I turned my head and saw one of my guards coming forward from under the trees. Personally I felt there was little need of such protection, but Kurlmurt had insisted that three of his men keep watch over me, and after finding my objections useless, I had shrugged my shoulders and submitted to his whim.

There was, however, no vain bravado about my attitude, for I was always on guard and never moved a step without my pistol in a handy pocket. Yet the guards in

broad daylight seemed a needless precaution, for if danger was about it was of the kind that craves the shield of darkness and the side street.

As the fellow stepped close to the railing he saluted. "Count Heinrich of Vankle wishes to see you, sir. He came through the park and was making for this part of the inn, when we stopped him."

"Indeed!" I said, sitting up with considerable interest, "and is he waiting under guard?"

The fellow smiled grimly.

"He took it better than I thought he would."

"Well, show him up."

I was all curiosity at once, for I had not seen Heinrich since we parted in his rooms at the palace, when he had promised to call in the matter of transferring the papers to us, under a cash consideration.

I shifted my pistol to my coat pocket and waited, my finger resting lightly on the trigger, for while it might be a peaceful errand, there was also a chance that he meant no good. I trusted Heinrich least of all, and yet it hardly seemed he would come so openly if he meant me harm. Then as I saw his tall, handsome figure coming forward, I rose slowly and stood waiting for him at the top of the steps.

He came on, looking out over the lake as he walked forward, and only turned to me as he suddenly paused at the bottom of the steps. Then with a surprised look on his face, as if he had just noticed my presence, he doffed his hat with an elaborate bow of mock courtesy.

"I crave a word with Sir Meddler."

"Then pray come forward."

"The Meddler is well guarded," he said, not moving from where he was.

"The Meddler?" I repeated, not understanding him at all.

"Yes," he answered, "the Meddler. You certainly are one, are you not?"

"Did you come to pick a quarrel?" I asked, "for if you did you had best go. I'm not ready to fight you yet."

"Yet?"

"Oh, I've cause enough when I decide to do so."

He smiled at that.

"It would occur to me that I was the one that had the cause," he said.

"It really matters little," I answered, "as long as there is cause."

"I'm glad you feel so, for truly," he rubbed his neck and stretched it painfully, "I'm looking for a little salve for an injured spot."

"You had better lay in a goodly supply," I counselled, "for the injuries may grow more painful before you put a balm on even the present one."

"Oh, no! oh no!" he laughed gaily. "It will be otherwise." He shot a glance at me from out his handsome eyes.

I laughed with him, for his way was such you could but like him, no matter what he said.

"Come," I finally suggested, "you did not call simply to tell me we were liable to quarrel?"

"Hardly," he answered. "I never make unnecessary assertions."

"Then may I inquire—?" I began.

"Certainly," he interrupted. "If you'll take your hand off that pistol I'll come up."

"I think then you'll stay where you are."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'd rather you'd take your hand away, for a nervous man may make a mistake."

"It might not be such a calamity."

"Well, I'll come up and take the chance, if you refuse to remove your hand."

"It's a bit cold, and my hand is warmer where it is," I answered.

"Yes, it is cold," he agreed, taking off his hat and fanning himself.

"Certainly you're cool enough," I assured him.

"Oh, always, though you did give me a start the other night. Now I'll come up, but do be careful."

He mounted the steps slowly and I nodded to a chair across the table. Then I rang with my left hand, and in an instant the waiter appeared.

"Whiskey and soda?" I asked.

He nodded.

When the decanters were placed on the table and he had lighted a cigarette, I took my hand out of my pocket.

"I feel better," he said.

"Yes," I agreed, "the whiskey is good."

"Very," he nodded.

"Did you come for any particular reason?" I asked finally when he had smoked for a few minutes in silence.

"I can't help but look at you and marvel," he answered.

"I'm glad at last to have given you something to

think of," I said, smiling at his frank, almost boyish way of speaking.

"Well, you have," he said, leaning back and sipping his whiskey; "you're so lucky. Now who would ever have supposed you'd suspect those steps were moved?"

He asked the question as if I had not the slightest interest in the matter.

"You can't help but admit it was fortunate for me?"

"Oh, I admit that." He nodded carelessly.

I watched him, slightly amused. Surely it took a brave man, and one possessed of great nerve, to so calmly discuss the outcome of such an adventure with the intended victim, when he himself had set the trap.

"Do you expect to be married very soon?" he demanded suddenly, looking at me from out the corners of his eyes.

For a moment I was tempted to lean across the table and strike him, for I knew to what he referred. But as I half rose, a flush of anger on my face, it occurred to me that possibly this was why he had come. If he could pick a quarrel with me he would gain the object he desired.

"If I am," I answered, speaking slowly, "only honest men will be present."

"There would, I suppose, be very few invitations."

I leaned across the table and spoke sharply.

"If you've come here for any purpose but to quarrel with me, out with it, and be quick. I've too much at stake to fight you before the fifth. After that I'll give you all the satisfaction you want, if you're not out of the country by that time with a price on your head. Now get down to business or go the way you came."

He turned and looked at me with a smile on his hand-

some face. The insolence in his manner had suddenly departed.

"You have got a temper!" he said, speaking slowly. "I'm glad to see you're not too cold blooded."

"You have a large number of moods," I answered, leaning back in my chair. Certainly; if any one knew whether or not I had a temper it was he.

"But I've got one piece of business now," he answered.

"Good!" I said. "Let's get at it. I've no great love for your company."

"Well, perhaps, then you won't care to have me join forces with you?" he questioned in the most matter-of-fact tone.

"No, I can't say that I do," I answered. "We've quite enough now to win out."

He nodded his head four times, as he had on that day in the anteroom when I first saw him, and smiled slightly to himself. He was looking out again across the lake, and he drew the smoke from his cigarette deep into his lungs.

"It's the first time I ever dealt with an American," he apologised.

The tone was so childlike, so explanatory, that I laughed aloud.

"Well, Americans are mortals! We have about the same sensibilities as others. We eat, sleep——"

"And bluff!" he added with a quick glance at me.

"Yes," I agreed, "when we have to deal with rogues."

For a moment I thought I had stirred him to anger. He flashed a look at me and turned in his chair quickly.

"Well?" I demanded.

"Well?" he said, leaning his elbows on the table and looking at me, "well what? Perhaps I am a rogue to your fine way of thinking. Perhaps you are a meddler to more than one person in Scarvania. Let it pass. What you think of me or what I think of you matters but little. I've no use for your opinion."

"And certainly, I have none in the world for yours," I interposed.

He nodded. "Precisely! So we understand each other perfectly, and, therefore, can get along very well together."

I saw he was trying to reach a point where he could say something, and I resolved to drop personalities and get at facts.

"Well, you talk frankly, at least," I said.

"That's one thing I admire in you," he answered. "Let's try and get at the purpose of my call."

"Good!"

He leaned back in his chair, tilted it against the rail and lighted another cigarette.

"How do you expect to have a ghost of a show in this thing without those documents?"

So it was, after all, the papers he had called about. They might even now rest in his pocket as they had once in mine. Possibilities lurked in the air; but I asked indifferently:

"Do you refer to the contents of the envelope which you said was not in your possession?"

"I'll not beat about the bush if you do," Heinrich replied promptly. "I've got the envelope that Von Merlder gave you, and you in turn gave the countess—

you know I have. For my own reasons I haven't turned it over to 'Old Pepper Box,' but—" and he leaned across the table and took the cigarette from his mouth, examining carefully the lighted end—"but I can any time before the fifth unless——"

"Unless you hold them until Joachim is crowned and then make Zergald dance."

He laughed good-naturedly.

"You have the very make-up for a schemer. Join forces with me and we'll run this country. There's money in it, too, and when it's all gone I know of at least two powers that would bid high for certain help and information."

"Your scheme is deeper than I thought," I replied.

"Do give a man credit for having some brains," he answered peevishly.

"I do," I said; "only your plan leads into fields I didn't think of, simply, I presume, through my lack of knowledge concerning your country."

"Well, I've that knowledge. You've got Kurlmurt and Von Merlder around your little finger. We'd make a brave pair. Things could be done. No? Well, I didn't think you would, so I'll not waste time trying to persuade you."

"It's hardly worth while."

"Well, if you won't come to me I'll have to come to you, I suppose. How much am I bid?"

Then suddenly, as he offered the documents so carelessly, it occurred to me that if I could but make him feel the crowning of the princess was assured without them the price would be far lower.

"We don't need the papers at all, you know."

He leaned across the table, a smile on his lips.

"Bluff!" he replied—"bluff! You've made too much of an effort to get them to make me believe that."

"My dear fellow, do you think we are fools? Her royal Highness will be crowned on the fifth without those papers in your pocket. I practically told Zergald so the first day I met him, and again last night. I've the necessary proof, and even my death wouldn't void it. The contents of that envelope is an extra thread, that's all. I'm willing to take it off your hands on that account, but on no other. The figure must, however, be very small. You've not, you see, captured such a prize as you imagined."

"Bluff!" was his only answer, but I saw that my words had impressed him.

"Bluff? Why, man, that evidence isn't worth a sou marquee after the fifth, unless Joachim is crowned, and Joachim," I laughed softly, "has no more chance of being crowned than you have of going to Heaven."

"Personalities were to be dropped," he said sharply. I could see my manner worried him.

"True!" I agreed. "I apologise."

"That story sounds fine," he said, leaning across the table; "but it won't go. You can't crown her Highness unless you prove Joachim illegitimate, and you know it. I've got the evidence. What it's value will be when Joachim is crowned I know full well, but still I'm ready to do business now."

"Oh, so you and your chief aren't on the best of terms?"

"He thinks we are. Not so long ago he made a little blunder where I had some interests, and he's paying for it now. Gad!" he went on, almost in a soliloquy, "if he'd

played fair then he'd not be tramping his office now and worrying so much."

I seized on the words eagerly. They were spoken absently, and so I judged there was some truth in them. If Zergald worried, we then had a better chance than I had believed. Certainly; only the papers were needed, and they were as good as mine already. The goods were up and the bids only had to be made. Money was no object just then, and soon I would hear Auctioneer Heinrich saying: Going! Going!! Gone!!! to John Harold Converse, highest bidder. Down would go the cash, Hilma would be crowned, and I—well, I—I would have my furrow finished.

"What do you say?" Heinrich demanded, being the first to get back to facts.

"Name your price."

He leaned across the table, pulled out a pencil and wrote six figures on a bit of paper.

I laughed at him. "Too much! Too much!"

"You've got more than that to give," he answered. "We've looked you up and know how much you're worth."

"Indeed!" I inquired. "Thanks for the attention, but bear in mind I'm not the purchaser."

"We were to talk openly, I thought," he said.

"Then don't doubt my statements so often."

"That's the price," he answered, rising.

I rose also and dropped my hand into my pocket. His tone indicated the interview was over, and so I was again on my guard.

"It's too high," I said. "They're not worth it to us."

"They're worth more than that to me when Joachim is crowned."

"But," I objected, "he won't be crowned, and then they are only waste paper."

"If you'll prove that to me I'll cut my price in half."

"I'm hardly going to show you our hand," I objected.

He shrugged his shoulders and started down the steps. As he neared the bottom he stopped.

"Go talk to her about it. I'll want, besides the money, Zergald's lands and title when he's banished."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed. "You're playing high."

"I'm no fool."

"No, and you're no glutton, are you? A quarter of a million, Zergald's lands—" I whistled softly.

"And his title too," he said. "I'll have his title with it or nothing."

I only smiled while he waited on the lower step, watching my face intently.

"You go and see her and then come and see me. I know there is some jockeying in a thing like this."

"Where will I see you?" I asked.

"Drive out toward the countess's. I'll meet you there somewhere."

"To-night?" I asked.

"No, not to-night. I've got to be away to-night on some cursed errand of Zergald's, and won't be back until late to-morrow afternoon. Come to-morrow night."

I nodded, little thinking that his errand for Zergald would make the stake, now so all important, nothing more than a secondary consideration.

CHAPTER XXIV

A BROKEN ENGAGEMENT

Heinrich had been gone but a few minutes when Karl came stamping out onto the balcony. I was so absorbed with my thoughts, however, that I neither heard him open the door nor cross the room, and his hand fell on my shoulder before I realised he was there.

"Day dreaming?" he demanded, throwing himself into the chair Heinrich had just vacated.

"Do you want that envelope again?" I asked indifferently.

"Oh, no, certainly not," he replied with a bitter laugh. "Not after the way it slipped through our fingers when we had Heinrich high and dry. Curse Zergald for getting out of those ropes. I thought I'd tied him fast."

"Well, I think our search has brought some results, even if we missed the documents," I answered.

"What then, pray tell me?" Karl demanded in some disgust. "I hope there's a loophole somewhere, for this Alvermurk following is mighty lukewarm, to my way of thinking."

"I believe we can still get the papers."

"What chance is there?" he asked, glancing at me carelessly, his tone full of disgust at the turn affairs had taken.

"A pretty good chance, and I can do it."

"What!" Karl exclaimed, coming to a sitting position with a jump. "What do you mean?"

Then I told him of Heinrich's call and the terms demanded, though even to him I said nothing of the money consideration. I hoped if the princess were willing to accede to the other terms, to beat Heinrich's cash price down much lower, and meet that part personally, for I knew the princess's fortune would not allow her to consider for a moment the offer, if the cash consideration were mentioned.

"His nerve is not lacking," Karl replied as I finished.

"True," I agreed; "but shouldn't the offer be explained to her Highness? I suppose it is for her to accept or decline."

"Beyond a doubt," Karl agreed. "She has an appointment with Kurlmurt about five, and we could see her then."

"Five," I said, looking at my watch and then at the lake, shining so invitingly before us. "We've lots of time. Let's get a boat and have a sail."

We found a small "cat" moored by the wharf at the foot of the gardens, and were soon under way. We sailed up the lake, close to the left shore, a fine breeze behind us, then worked back under the walls of the old castles, rising high from the rocks opposite the city. It was my first near view of them, and I was naturally much interested. Karl put the boat about so that we ran in under the walls of Zergald's castle, and while it differed little from the other, I looked it over with great interest. Had I only known then how much a knowledge of its plan would help, and, too, in so brief a time, I would have

spent the day studying it from every vantage point of the lake.

When we got back to the inn there was just enough time left to reach the princess's by five o'clock.

Our drive to the palace was a quiet affair, for we both felt that Hilma could not agree to Heinrich's terms, and so, we were as far from the object point as we had been at any time.

Failure was a new thing to me. I had given up that which I had wanted, but to strive and not accomplish made me angry, and when I grew angry I was very apt to grow sulky and moody. And to add to that state of mind, I had not even a single pleasant prospect before me.

If we crowned the princess I would go my way—have to go my way. If we failed, think you I would for one moment feel I had the right to press my claim, when the condition making such a thing possible had come through my failure?

Such a mood hung over us both even when we reached the castle, and I, for one, was glad yet disappointed to find Kurlmurt alone, and the princess not yet returned.

If we two were glum, Kurlmurt was the opposite. He had just seen the Duke of Alvermurk again, and that worthy had good news as to the feelings among many of the grand dukes.

"But what's that to us?" Karl demanded peevishly. "The evidence is what we need."

"What is it to us?" demanded the general with a look of keen surprise on his face. "It's all and more than all. Up to now I have felt Zergald had the duke with him,

body and soul. Now we have one among them, besides myself, who will lead. What could I do before? If I supported the princess alone it was charged I worked for personal gain. Now, Alvermurk will lead her cause. Already he has a dozen others more than lukewarm ready to come to our aid, if they can be assured that they will be safe from Zergald's wrath."

"Yes; a pretty lot of supporters. Not one ready to stand on his own feet, but afraid of Zergald," Karl objected.

"Gad, Karl!" Kurlmurt growled, "don't play the pessimist. Get some life in you if you *don't* feel happy."

"Happy!" Karl flung back. "Well, I'm not ready to put my faith in your grand dukes. They're bound hide and hair to Zergald, and without evidence, affidavits sworn to, we will gain nothing—do nothing."

"Get the documents if you can," Kurlmurt answered, "but with them or without them this support among the grand dukes will be of great avail. I've known the people loved Hilma and wanted her their queen. Now I see the same feeling coming to the front among the dukes, bound as they are to Zergald. Let them once learn that Joachim is illegitimate, and they will rally to our standard in a body."

"Admit it," Karl answered, "yet how are you to prove he is without these very affidavits?"

"Let the princess go before the dukes on the fourth, tell them simply and straightforwardly the truth, and you will see that they will believe her."

Karl shook his head, but Kurlmurt would not be denied.

"Then the people gathering for the coronation would take on a true holiday look. Let Joachim's face come down from the banners and flags and let the princess's go up in its place. Man, the country would go mad—mad! do you hear me? They pretend now to be glad. They hang out their flags, the whole city is draped in colours, but let them feel they celebrate her coronation, not his, and twice the bunting will be shown; twice the flags will be unfurled, and then and only then will the people set up a true shout of joy. How many people are in Zakbar for the coronation, think you? Not half that would be here if she were to be made queen."

The older man's enthusiasm caught hold of me, as it did Karl, and to a great extent offset the gloom we had brought with us.

Then, as I had a chance, I mentioned that Heinrich had called upon me and of his offer.

"The cur!" Kurlmurt growled. "The cur! I'll teach him yet."

"Will her Highness accept such terms?" I asked.

"Never! Not with my consent," the older man declared.

And thus as we talked on the time slipped by, and before we realised it, the glow from our cigars was noticeable in the darkness.

"Look!" and Karl pointed across the lake. "There's a light in Zergald's castle."

"Well?" I asked, seeing nothing strange in the incident.

"It's in a part never used," Kurlmurt said, speaking slowly and watching other lights spring up in the right wing.

"Doesn't he use the palace at all?" I questioned.

"There's a keeper there, but no one else," Karl replied, his eyes watching the distant lights sharply.

"Zergald may be paying the place a visit," I suggested.

"I've never known him to go there these ten years. He closed it when his daughter died, and he's never opened it since," Kurlmurt said.

The pathos in the simple statement touched me more than it did them, for I had never associated a wife and children with our grey-eyed, sharp and cunning adversary.

"Well, let him light her up again," Karl exclaimed, rising and turning to the light that fell from the window to glance at his watch. "I'd like to know what is keeping her Highness?"

"She went to visit some sick people on Murkel Hill," Kurlmurt explained, "but she should have been back by now."

A half hour passed before Karl rose again to look at his watch. When he mentioned the hour we each glanced at the other. With that glance doubt sprang up in our faces.

Dread, fear, alarm will spread from one to another like fire licking light wood. What it was that made me feel something was amiss I cannot say. I was not well enough acquainted to know how long the princess should be gone or where Murkel Hill was located, yet for all that a great uneasiness seized upon me, and as Kurlmurt rose and strode toward the other end of the terrace to look down the drive, I leaned over to Karl.

"Who was with her?" I asked.

He shook his head, but repeated the question to Kurlmurt when he returned.

"She drove," he answered. "Frederick was on the box and one of the grooms."

"Barnsmurk?" Karl asked.

"Yes! Yes!" the older man exclaimed with some impatience. "He rode with the carriage, of course."

"The countess did not go?" Karl asked again.

"No. She had a headache."

"Something has detained her," I said. "Lieutenant Barnsmurk is a surety against any harm coming to her."

"Is he?" Kurlmurt almost whispered, leaning over toward us. I saw his face was white, and I started at the strange look on it.

"Is he?" he asked again; "and what harm would come to her? What harm are we thinking of? Has Zergald learned of the feeling among the grand dukes and made way with the one great obstacle to his plans?"

The words, possibly the voice or the fear in our hearts, made Karl and myself leap to our feet with a bound.

"Which way to Murkel Hill?" I demanded.

But already Karl was running down the terrace toward the stables, and I knew he would have the horses ready as quickly as any one.

An instant before we had been free of fear, but now with Kurlmurt's words all manner of alarming thoughts rushed through our minds.

Suddenly a sound fell on my ear. I stopped, listened, and far off the noise of horses' hoofs beating the road could be heard.

I saw that Kurlmurt had caught the sound as well as I.

The noise from our mounts as Karl came galloping up, followed by two grooms, shut out the sound for an instant and then we again heard the hoof beats.

"Oh, it's she!" Karl exclaimed with a great gladness in his voice.

Kurlmurt shook his head.

"The horses are galloping like mad," I said.

Far down the road we could hear them coming on. Two horses pushed into a run and the sound of carriage wheels too. What could it mean? Why the haste? We three stood waiting, a thousand questions on our faces, but speaking no word.

The running horses turned at the gate, came on up the drive. Suddenly it struck me that the team was running away, and then far off through the trees I caught a glimpse of the carriage itself.

There was but one man on the box, and he was urging the horses on, leaning far down while his whip fell on their flanks like mad.

At such a time minutes take ages to pass. Then down the straight avenue the carriage swung into view, and we saw that it was Barnsmurk himself on the box. The whip still swung over the two horses running low in their collars, white with foam from head to flank.

Then suddenly, as he had exerted all energy to urge them forward, he dropped his whip and, pulling like mad, strove to stop the team at the door.

With a rush the horses pulled to their haunches, flung the gravel about, and then before the carriage came to a stop Barnsmurk flung the reins from him and sprang to the ground.

Across his forehead a deep mark stood out like fire, and over his face the red blood from an ugly wound flowed unchecked. His clothes were covered with dirt and dust.

"Her Highness, general," he gasped, saluting, "she's gone!"

And then before we could reach him he pitched forward and lay like one dead at our feet.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PATH TO THE LAKE

We carried the bodies of Frederick and the groom from the carriage where Barnsmurk had thrown them, revived him and got his story.

The carriage had been stopped in a dark part of the road by a dozen men. Frederick and the groom had gone down under their shots, while Barnsmurk had received a blow on the head that had sent him from his saddle unconscious.

How long he had lain there in the road he could not say, but when he finally came to he had found the princess gone, the carriage some hundred feet farther on down the road, and the two servants lying dead in the bushes.

What happened then we knew almost without his telling. Throwing the two bodies into the carriage, he had driven like mad to bring us the news.

These facts we got in a few minutes after Barnsmurk was brought out of his faint, and then action took possession of us, one and all.

For the rest of the night there was little sleep for any one. Trusted men were sent out to scour the country, while Karl, Kurlmurt and myself took to horse and rode here—there—everywhere.

When dawn was breaking we met again. I recall now

with great vividness the picture that met my eyes as I strode in through the open doorway to the room in which Hilma and I had met and spoken of Zergald's note.

Mud stained from heel to cap, I flung myself from my horse and, leaving it with a groom, went down the long hall and into the room where Karl and Kurlmurt were waiting.

Kurlmurt, his hands clasped behind him, his grey head bent in gloomy thought, paced backward and forward by the window at the end.

Karl, despair on his face, sat gazing into the open fire.

Outside, through the half drawn curtains, the grey light of early sunrise marked the trees against the sky. A sleepy bird twittered, rustled and chirped more boldly as it got its morning wits about it in the ivy on the wall.

I paused on the threshold and the two looked up.

No one spoke as I turned to Kurlmurt, then to Karl. What was in their faces needed no words to confirm the failure of their search. To their questioning eyes I could only shake my head.

At that sign, which told I was no bearer of good news, Kurlmurt cast his hands out in despair and turned back to his silent walk. Karl passed me a glass of wine, which I downed with a gulp. I had no heart to eat, but knew the need of physical strength, so munched a biscuit and drank another glass of port.

Suddenly Kurlmurt came across to where I sat and threw a heavy revolver on the table before me.

"If she's not found, if harm comes to her, I'll kill Zergald three days from now."

"The documents certainly are not in his hands," I answered.

"Damn the documents!" Karl shouted, springing to his feet, tears almost in his eyes. "Damn the things! They have brought this on her."

"Assuredly damn them," I agreed; "but first damn your cursed prime minister and his knave Heinrich."

"Heinrich!" Karl whispered, suddenly growing calm. "I'll kill that cur."

"Come," I said, leaning back in my chair and surveying the two of them. "Let's not talk of killing any one or damning anything until we have her back again."

They were mad with grief, and I could see plainly neither was fit to make a sane suggestion or lead us out of the tangle. My heart was as heavy as theirs, for I cared for her as they could not. Yet it was no time for cursing or threats. Action was the need, and so without a word or by their leave I took the reins of authority into my own hands.

"The news of this must not be allowed out," I counselled. "We must each start off on a quiet search, now that light is coming. Zergald has no intention of murder nor will he let any harm come to her. His only desire is to keep her safe so that it will be impossible for us to bring her before the grand dukes. Let's get the mud off our clothing, and with fresh linen we'll go out as if for an early ride. Make to the place where they were held up and then follow their tracks. There must have been a dozen of them from what Barnsmurk has told us, and certainly they'll have left as broad a trail as we will need."

"Aye, you have the wisdom of it," Kurlmurt said, stopping in his walk to and fro.

Karl stared across the table at me, tears in his eyes now, and no pretence of hiding them.

"Thank God!" he said, his voice choking, "I brought you; and thank God you've learned to love her well enough to guide us right."

"Let's get going," I interposed, rising to my feet.

"True love," Karl went on, not moving from his place, his shining eyes fast upon me, "true love leads where all other affections fail."

"True love?" Kurlmurt questioned vaguely, looking from one to the other. "True love? What do you mean?"

"He means," I said, turning to the grim old warrior, determined to tell him all now that Karl had flung the thing out, "that I have come to love your niece."

I faced him, expecting almost anything. That he would burst into anger I had no doubt, yet I did not justify my feelings, for God knows they needed none.

For a brief moment Kurlmurt let his gaze rest on Karl's face, as if to read confirmation of my words, and then slowly his look travelled to mine, where certainly he could see the truth, and then he spoke. But those words. No demand as to my right to feel as I did; no doubt expressed that I had said aught to her; no question at all, only a look of great kindness and pity on his grim, old face; a hand held out in added pity and eight words:

"I wish it might be so, my boy."

How much said in so little. I had liked the gruff, old gentleman, the Duke of Kurlmurt, well before; but then

as he took me to his heart, as he would have his niece had she been delivered at that moment, I loved him as one man can love another.

"What must be must," I answered, and I think both he and Karl caught the words, recalled quickly how they had been spoken by me before in that same room, and saw in one brief second how we two, she and I, had turned the matter over. They knew then that we had spoken of the thing and decided what there was for us to do.

Quickly we prepared for further search. The horses were led up, and I, mounting after Karl and Kurlmurt, rode down the long avenue with Barnsmurk at my side.

Once out of sight of the castle we rode sharp, and when in the open road put our horses to a gallop.

We turned in through the woods a half mile farther on, and by a narrow bridle-path came out into the road, well toward the spot where the hold-up occurred.

Two hundred yards from the place I called a halt and dismounted.

"No other team has passed here since last night," I said, examining the ground. "We'll try and see what the tracks tell us."

Kurlmurt nodded and I walked on, the others following, Barnsmurk leading my horse.

The sun was well up and a soft morning hush was in the woods about us.

On our left high rocks towered dark and damp; on the right the woods closed in to the very edge of the road, and as one passed on, the ground was seen to fall away toward the lake, not far below us. Suddenly a thought

struck me, not at all reassuring. If I was right we would not, I feared, track the rascals far.

"Does this road come near to the lake just about here?" I demanded.

"A quarter of a mile or less beyond," Karl answered.

I asked nothing more, but pressed on. Then we came to many wheel tracks, and I paused again.

"Here's where you found the carriage?" I questioned.

Barnsmurk nodded.

"And here," I went on, pausing again some ways on, "is where they stopped you?"

Again Barnsmurk nodded. All could see the marks of the scuffle. The ground had been cut up by many feet, and in the dust two dark blood spots showed where Frederick and the groom had fallen.

"I came to lying there," Barnsmurk said, pointing to the right.

"And your horse?"

"Shot."

A brief look about, and we discovered the carcass where it had been dragged into the bushes, the saddle and bridle gone. Some boughs had been cut and thrown over it.

"That's been done since last night," Barnsmurk declared. "It was in the road when I regained my senses."

"Yes, they've been back, some of them. The footprints are fresher here than in the road, and too those branches thrown over the horse are not withered at all. They must have been here within the hour."

Kurlmurt cursed aloud, and all of us glanced about, half hoping we might see some one of the villains. Karl's

hand played with the pistol in his pocket and Barnsmurk started down the road as if to take a look about.

I called him back and he came, for he, too, had accepted my assumed authority.

"The lake you say," I began when they had gathered about me, "is close in here."

"The woods lead down to it. Through the ravine there below is a path."

"Then I fear we'll only be able to trace them to the water. I had hoped they would go inland."

Kurlmurt nodded, seeing my point.

The tracks led us back along the road from where the fight had occurred and turned off into the path that went straight down the ravine.

I led the way, walking rapidly, while Kurlmurt stumbled behind and Karl followed him. Barnsmark we left with the horses, much to the poor fellow's discomfort.

I pushed on before them, and at a turn in the path found what I had expected—a handkerchief. That we would follow her Hilma, of course, knew, and I had counted on her dropping some token, a handkerchief or a glove or some trinket, that would tell us we were on the right track.

So when I came upon the dainty bit of lace, all stained and muddy, I dropped it into my pocket like a guilty schoolboy. I had found it and it was mine. All about us were the marks of footsteps. The soft moss on the side of the path was crushed and trampled. The handkerchief was not needed to convince the others that we

were on the right track, so I saw no need to tell them yet that I had found something belonging to her.

If that happened which I prayed God in my heart each moment would not happen, I meant to have the last thing she had held, the last thing she had left as a guide to us, to me, who she knew in her heart would follow and fight until he could fight no longer.

At last the path ended in the rocky edge of the shore and turned at the base of a big boulder to the right. I waited here for Kurlmurt and Karl, and then as the path was much wider, we three went on together, side by side, saying not a word.

I kept my eyes open for some spot where it might have been possible for a boat to land.

The rocks were piled up along the shore, and as far as I could see it was a drop of five or ten feet to the water. Besides, boulders, black and round, stuck their heads from the surface, and it seemed almost impossible for a boat to get in closer than a hundred feet or over.

Thinking that the landing had been made above us, I stopped and looked back for an opening in the shore.

"There's a narrow channel beyond," Karl said, reading my thoughts.

We went on, and in a deep break in the shore, where a mountain brook undoubtedly found its overflow in the spring, was a narrow sandy beach.

The mark of a boat keel was plainly to be seen and many feet had cut the hard sand.

"There!" said Karl, first.

I nodded, and Kurlmurt uttered a deep growl, for among the many footprints was one small and dainty.

For a moment we stood there, the three of us, looking across the lake, as if trying to read in its trackless waters which way the boat had gone.

Then suddenly my eyes fell on the dark outline of Zergald's castle. Why hadn't the thing come to me sooner? I looked at Karl, then at Kurlmurt, and saw their eyes were resting on the same dark towering walls.

CHAPTER XXVI

A NEW ALLY

We went back more quickly than we came down, Kurlmurt and Karl cast into deeper despondency than before.

To me there was no reason to feel still more depressed, for we had simply confirmed our suspicions. Zergald would want no harm to befall her, so where but in his castle could she, under the circumstances, be safer? I reasoned it out so and then gave some directions.

We had no time to lose now.

"You, Karl, ride back to the city quickly. Look about you, arouse no suspicion, but find if Heinrich is around. And," I counselled, as I saw the flash in his eye, "keep a civil tongue in your head, if you see him or Zergald. We need every hand now, and Zergald would be glad of a chance to put you under arrest."

Karl nodded as he sat there on his horse, but as he rode off I again counselled care.

"Don't spoil the whole thing by any hot-headedness. We'll have her back again in a day."

Then the three of us rode back slowly.

"You think Zergald has her in his castle?" Kurlmurt asked.

"It's very likely."

"Then why not storm the place? I can raise a force in no time."

I saw the idea had been brooding in his mind since we had left the water's edge, so I did not hasten to disagree with him.

"How many men can you count upon?" I asked.

"A thousand."

"Any cannon?"

"Yes."

"How long would it take to capture the castle?"

"He'll have no more than a handful within."

"Undoubtedly."

"We'd be inside by morning."

"If you were unmolested."

He looked at me sharply.

"Zergald," I added, "might feel your raising an armed force and training cannon on his castle warranted some action on his part."

"We could hold him off and still get in to-morrow."

"By the time you did we'd have a pretty fair fight on our hands, don't you think?"

"Yes, but what of it? Who fears the fight?"

"Not I for one," I answered, smiling, "but I do fear civil war. We had one once in America, and I speak not from actual experience, but from knowledge."

"Civil war!" he repeated after me.

"Yes."

"Civil war!" he said again.

I saw I had set him thinking in a way no amount of argument might have availed.

"What then?" he demanded.

"There must be some way in, say after dark. Karl and myself could try the walls."

"Only two?"

"Sometimes two are better than an army."

"Well?"

"At least they make less noise and attract less attention."

"And if you do get in?"

"Get out," I said, "and bring her Highness with us."

"But if you fail?"

"There's no such thing as fail in this," I answered.

He shot at me a sharp glance from under his heavy eyebrows.

"I'll leave it to you, Converse. God sent you here in the first place, God will see you through now."

"Amen," I answered, and we went on sharply toward the castle.

I, for one, was quite ready for breakfast, and Barnsmurk found his appetite after a bit. Kurlmurt, however, was pressed down, and scarcely touched his food.

"Come! come!" I admonished him. "It will not help our cause one whit to refuse the food. Eat, man, and have strength to go on with the game. Why," I laughed heartily, assuming a gaiety I little felt, "we have the thing as good as settled. Let Karl but find Heinrich gone from the city, and we have need of no greater proof that her Highness is across the lake with him as her gaoler."

"What?" the old man demanded, springing to his feet, "she there with that scoundrel and you sitting here calmly eating and speaking of it."

"But why not?" I asked a bit sharply, to bring him to his senses. "Let us know the forces of the enemy and

then we may circumvent them. You'd not counsel an attack by one regiment until you knew whether you were to meet one or a dozen?"

"True! true!" he agreed, calming himself; "you are right."

Before the meal was half over Karl was back with the very news I had expected. Heinrich was out of the city, had been since the evening before.

And then, as if to cheer us all and make the task easier, came a confirmation of our suspicions. A servant entered and whispered in Kurlmurt's ear. The duke glanced up sharply.

"Who is he? A fellow to see me— Important! Let him in!"

"He wishes to see you alone, your Grace," the servant suggested.

"Have him in here—in here!" Kurlmurt ordered.

The servant withdrew quickly and instantly returned with a short, thick-set fellow in corduroy and leggings.

He held his hat in his hand, but looked about him with a brave face. His clear blue eyes shone with excitement and his cheeks were flushed.

"Well?" Kurlmurt demanded.

The fellow hesitated, and then asked if he might have a private word with Kurlmurt.

"What's your errand?" Kurlmurt demanded.

"Of her Highness," the fellow answered in a whisper.

You could have heard a pin drop before Kurlmurt spoke again.

"If it is of her go on. Speak here!"

Constraint fell off the fellow at the words, and he stepped forward and spoke quickly.

"Count Heinrich of Vankle is at Duke Zergald's castle, your Grace. I'm the gate-man and caretaker there—Bern Valter's my name. My mother, your Grace, served the family once before she married."

"Yes, I know," Kurlmurt nodded. "She married Valter, Zergald's gardener."

"The same, sir. Well, Count Heinrich has been living at the castle two days back. Yesterday he sent me off early in the day, and I did not return until late in the night. When I did I found twenty men or so housed in the banquet hall, while Count Heinrich had moved down himself, onto the lower floor, to the small library. I thought it strange, but said nothing, as it was not my place. This morning while working on the moat at the back of the wing under the library window I heard a bit of a scratching and, God bless my soul, your Grace, when I looked up there was her Highness at the window."

"Aye!" Kurlmurt said, his grey eyebrows coming down sharply over his eyes. Barnsmurk moved uneasily in his chair, Karl sat with tense face, while I watched the fellow, to be sure this was no fresh trap into which we were expected to fall by its apparent frankness.

"It was the window beyond the small library where Count Heinrich has taken up his quarters," Valter went on as Kurlmurt signed for him to proceed. "I would have called out had not her Highness shook her head and put her fingers to her lips. I moved over to the window, and when I got below it the princess spoke to me. She

bade me come here, as I love my country, and tell you where she is."

The fellow stopped and shifted nervously on his feet.

"Nothing more?" Kurlmurt demanded.

"She only added she was unharmed and had been treated kindly."

"Damn kindly, I'll warrant," Karl muttered, moving with a great indrawn breath.

I took a pencil and a piece of paper from my pocket.

"Can you tell me how the castle is planned?" I asked.

The fellow looked at me in some surprise.

"Yes, let's have the plan," Kurlmurt said.

Under Valter's direction, I soon drew a rough diagram of the castle.

"How many men are there?" I asked.

"Twenty or so."

"Where are they lodged?"

"On the second floor, at the far end, in the banquet hall."

"Are they allowed any wine?"

He looked at me and shook his head.

"Could you get some to them?"

"I might with their evening meal."

"That would do," I said, considering as I spoke the scheme I had half framed.

"By the way, how did you get away?" I suddenly demanded, turning from the plan before me.

"Count Heinrich sent for me soon after I had seen the princess and bade me come to the city with a note."

"Have you the note?"

"I delivered it."

"To be sure," I agreed, "but where?"

"At a house in the Wurtsmurton."

"No. 21?" I suggested.

The fellow nodded with a look of surprise that I should know the number.

"And who took the note?" I inquired.

"A short man wrapped in a long coat. I could not see him well, for he only opened the door a crack."

"Zergald!" Karl muttered.

Valter glanced up with a startled look, and a flash of hatred flew into his eyes at the name of the prime minister.

I had been wondering if the fellow had a motive in bringing us the news, besides his wish to serve the princess, and thought I saw it in his look at the mention of Zergald's name. Possibly, we were not the only ones who had a dislike for Old Pepper Box.

"And after you gave up the note?" I inquired.

"I came here to see his Grace of Kurlmurt."

"And well you'll be paid for it," Kurlmurt declared.

"If you're not knocked in the head by Heinrich when you get back," I suggested.

Valter stood between us, looking from one to the other in doubt. He felt that Kurlmurt was the one to question, and did not understand my interference.

"I took good pains that no one followed me here," he said. "I went clean about by the old town from the Wurtsmurton, and came onto the grounds along the shore by the lake. No one followed me, I am sure."

I nodded with satisfaction. It was worth something to know we had a fellow of brains to deal with.

"And now," I asked, studying the plans again, "what's the best way into the castle?"

"There is, sir, in the wall, a small gate. If one came in a boat he could make a landing on the rock. There is a ring in the big flat one under the gate. Tie your boat there."

"And the gate, is it locked?"

"I'll have it opened at the hour you name."

The fellow's answers and suggestions were so pat that I looked at him in some wonder.

"You've a good head on those shoulders of yours, Valter."

"Thank you, sir."

"We'll have to find a better use for your wits than tending the prime minister's castle."

"Thank you, sir," he answered again, and then started to say something, but stopped while a bit of a smile played across his face.

"Well?" I asked.

"Nothing, sir."

"We'll welcome the humour just now."

"Well, sir, I was only thinking I'd have to find something else after I open the gate."

We all joined him in his mirth, and it was a relief to feel we could laugh again.

"Well," I said, looking at Karl, "how is ten to-night for you?"

"It will be dark then," Karl answered.

"We'll expect the gate open at ten, then," I said, turning to Valter, "and a good supply of wine to those fellows of Heinrich's when you serve them their dinner."

"Very good, sir; and if it's very dark you can find the gate by the great pipe."

"And what may that be?" I inquired.

"The moat drains off through a pipe into the lake. There's quite a bit of water running now, for the moat is full, as the springs on the mountain are running quite strong."

"The falling water from the pipe then will guide us. Ten to-night."

"Don't fail us," Karl added.

The fellow was half way to the door, but he stopped at Karl's words and faced us.

"I'm in Duke Zergald's service, your Grace, but—he, sir—my father—it was he who had him shot, sir, and her Highness was kind to my mother then, very kind to her."

Kurlmurt nodded his head at the remembrance.

The others of us dropped our eyes quickly from the fellow's face.

"Ten o'clock, sir," he said in a new tone, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FIGHT IN THE PARK

When the door closed on Valter we were silent for an instant, each busy with his thoughts.

I had no doubt now that the fellow would serve us, for the look on his face as he had spoken of his father's death and of the princess's kindness to his mother told the feeling in his heart.

"Well?" Karl demanded, turning to me.

The others drew their chairs closer, and with the rough outline of the castle before us, we laid our plans for her rescue.

"You and I," I said, speaking to Karl, "we'll get a boat, cross to the castle, and once inside it should be easy."

"But I, sir?" Barnsmurk made bold to ask.

I hesitated and looked at Kurlmurt.

"As you decide," he said.

"I let harm come to her," the poor fellow pleaded; "let me help in her rescue."

"Very well," I agreed. "The three of us will go, while you, sir," I said, turning to Kurlmurt, "might go to Zergald and acquaint him with the princess's disappearance. It may serve to put him off his guard."

"A peaceful part for me," Kurlmurt objected.

"It will help if Zergald but feels we do not suspect

him of having had a hand in the matter. If we can slip in and seize Heinrich, we should have the princess out before any one is the wiser. Then you can have the satisfaction of calling upon Zergald again and advise him of your niece's recovery—say, after being lost in the woods over night."

Kurlmurt nodded and chuckled grimly at the humour of the thing, should we succeed.

"We can get a boat at the inn," Karl said.

"But we must be on the watch that we are not stopped. Zergald will, I think, having her Highness, keep a line on us to see that we do not make a move toward her recovery."

"I ordered those who saw the bodies to hold their tongues," Kurlmurt said, "but each hour I fear the thing will get around."

"By morning her Highness will be here, and then the danger will be over. We can say she was detained or stopped somewhere."

"Her Highness can make some excuse," Karl said.

"And now you'd best put your anger in your pocket," I advised, turning to Kurlmurt, "and call upon Zergald, while we take to horse and again ride to the spot where she was captured. From there we'll go across country, as if we were searching for her. Thus, if Zergald is keeping an eye on our movements we'll make him feel we have no idea her Highness is in his castle."

We secured fresh mounts and went about the task of helping throw sand in Zergald's eyes.

Late in the afternoon we rode back to the castle, where, leaving Karl and Barnsmurk, I went on to the inn.

I cleaned my pistol, saw that it was to be counted upon and then tested again and again the steel in a short rapier Karl had left with me. We were each to take a sword and our revolvers. A short piece of rope I also secured, and with a pocketful of extra cartridges was ready for nine o'clock to come.

There was some time yet, so I sat down on the balcony for a long hour, smoked cigar after cigar, while my eyes rested on the distant outline of Zergald's castle.

The blood raced through my veins at the thought of her held captive there. Time and again doubt seized me as to the possibility of our plans carrying through successfully. Would it not be better to gather together twenty men, ride to the castle and demand the princess's release? Assuredly that was the thing to be done, and yet no more had the idea come than the danger in it was apparent.

Suppose we did? No doubt we would be given leave to search, while she for whom we looked would be taken to some remote and secret dungeon.

Truly there seemed but one thing to do. She had been carried off by a quick and sudden attack; a like method alone would release her.

The agony I went through that day I have no heart to set down here. One scheme, one thought, one mad dream came rushing in upon me, only to be followed by another equally wild. A man waiting his execution could hardly have found the minutes so long and yet so short.

The one solace in the whole day was the remembrance of the word brought by Valter from the princess herself, that no harm had been done her. And yet even with

that assurance fear gripped my heart as I pictured a thousand and one insults inflicted upon her by that villain Heinrich. And then the deep cunning of the man came to my mind as a guarantee of her safety.

If Zergald's plans should fail even at the eleventh hour, he would prefer to stand well with her Highness. Therefore, beyond a doubt, he would do her all favour possible, make her captivity as easy as he could, and all the time explain most plausibly that he was carrying out Zergald's order because he must, but doing it himself to assure her greater safety.

The more I thought on it, the more certain I was that such would be his course. In fact, I had every reason to believe that already the princess felt indebted to him for some favour he had deftly made her feel he had done, yet the while apparently trying to conceal the act.

There was no doubt as to his being a clever rogue, and I gave him full credit for his cunning. And while I did so and had a consolation in the thought that it meant her greater safety, I rebelled that she should be thrown in contact with such a man. Woe unto Heinrich of Vankle if he should show fight. Between Karl, Barnsmurk, and myself he stood in danger of faring ill.

I heard the half hour strike, and suddenly with the deep tone of the cathedral clock that floated solemnly and clear to my ear came the thought that in three days I must be gone.

"In three days I must be gone," I said aloud, and then, because those three days were likely to be busy ones, I turned to my luggage and began to pack my bags.

I dressed myself in my riding breeches, boots, a light

outing shirt and a short coat, as the best I had with me for active work, or a fight, and as I finally closed my largest bag I found the clock pointing to a few minutes before nine.

It was, therefore, nearly time for Karl and Barnsmurk to arrive, and I decided to go down to the lake and wait for them at the boat landing.

I picked up my cap, dropped my revolver into my pocket with the extra cartridges, and slipping my sword under my arm, went out on the balcony.

A light breeze was blowing across the water, and the lap of the waves on the pebbled beach came like soft music to my ears. Out across, on the farther side of the lake, lights burned in Zergald's castle. They had been there the night before, but now they shone like a beacon.

Under one of those lights she, dearer to me than all else, dearer than life itself, sat. Was she counting on Karl or on Kurlmurt or on John Converse to lead the rescue? Was she longing for the voice of one of us, and for which voice did she long the most?

Bad thoughts for a man who has to lead an expedition such as we had planned. Bad thoughts, and I closed my heart to its true feeling, because thus closed it could help her best. And then I could not keep back the thought that it must be closed not only to do the work of that night, but for all time. Another bad thought! So I shrugged my shoulders and started down the path to the lake.

Suddenly on my right hand I heard a faint noise, and instinctively sprang behind a bush on the left as a

huge club came crashing through the air where I had stood.

So, thought I, as I crouched low, my ears alert, the fight is to be begun on this side of the lake. I had my revolver out, though I did not wish to use it.

For a moment no sound came to me, and then, thinking perhaps I could draw their cover, I uttered as heartfelt a groan as I could muster.

"You landed him," a voice said instantly, so near that I almost started.

"Be careful," a second cautioned.

I groaned again.

"He's coming around," the first spoke. "We'd better get him before he does."

It was so dark I could not see my assailants, but in an instant the bushes began to snap and two forms loomed up in the path.

One of them kicked out with his foot.

"He's not here."

"He groaned," the other insisted.

I could have reached out and touched them with my hand.

One moved forward nearer to me, and as he leaned over to feel for my body I brought the butt of my pistol down on his head.

He fell without a word, and as he did so I sprang over him at the throat of the second.

In the darkness I missed my calculation, however, and while I struck the fellow and sent him sprawling, I failed to get my fingers on him, but fell myself.

In an instant he was upon his feet, and with an oath

set off down the path toward the lake as fast as he could run.

Scrambling to my feet, I started after him, but in the darkness lost my way.

At last I gave it up, and retracing my steps, began a search for the one I had knocked down. I hunted high and low, but could find no trace of him. What path I had taken from the balcony I could not say, and so I finally gave up the search, confident there could have been but two of them, and that by now they were well out of the way.

The sound of the water was on my left, and guided by that and the lights in the inn, I made my way to the shore.

As I swung a light keel boat into the water a step sounded on the gravel. Warned by my previous adventure, I crouched down beside the boat, revolver in hand, to make sure who was co ing.

In a minute I recognised Barnsmurk, and hailed him in a low voice.

"Did you see any one prowling about?" I asked.

"No," he answered; "no one."

Suddenly, as I started to tell him of my adventure, a pistol shot rang out, followed by a cry, two or three oaths, and then Karl's voice shouted:

"Get away."

Barnsmurk sprang forward, though I called him back.

I could hear the sound of steel upon steel, and felt sure Karl was holding his own. The danger of a trap into which we all might fall held me back for an instant.

Then Karl's voice called a warning again.

"Push off, John, push off!"

"Get him quick!" I heard some one call, and then a shot rang out, and this time Barnsmurk set up a shout for me to get away.

I cared not to desert them, yet if the three of us were knocked over the princess stood a poor chance of being released.

I hesitated, however, to leave, but stood one foot in the boat, the other on the float, waiting to hear what would come of the fight.

A great fuss was being made, and I trusted it would attract the people in the inn.

Then suddenly some one cried: "There!" and a great stillness came over the garden.

And then as suddenly some one came rushing toward the lake, calling, "Wait! Wait, John!"

It was all that was needed to give Karl's warning confirmation, for the voice was neither his nor Barnsmurk's.

As the man came on, calling again for we to wait, I pushed off the boat, dropped into the bottom of it and waited.

A figure ran out onto the wharf, called again, and seeing that I had discovered the trick, whipped out his revolver and began firing. The bullets sang about me, and then some one else shouted:

"You fool! stop!"

Another man stood on the float. I raised up carefully, took aim, and fired.

The fellow who had come last, and who was the taller of the two, threw up his arms with a cry and pitched forward.

Then as lights sprang up in the inn and men came rushing into the garden with lanterns I bent to the oars. It was already late, and if they had a suspicion of our plans there was need of haste, for the castle must be reached before Heinrich could be warned.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A USEFUL DRAIN PIPE

I PULLED as hard as I could for five minutes and then stopped. Over the lake a great stillness hung, and satisfied no one was following me, I bent to the oars again.

A fear gripped my heart that it had gone ill with Karl and Barnsmurk, yet the sudden commotion in the inn might have meant they would secure help from that quarter.

The fact that Barnsmurk had come unmolested led me to hope the attack was simply an effort to get Karl and myself out of the way, in which case it bade fair to go easy with them both, even if they were not rescued, and also made it possible that Heinrich would not be warned of my coming.

Once or twice I paused to see if I had held my course with the lights of the inn astern, and then as the black outline of the castle walls loomed close ahead I slowed my stroke and rowed in carefully.

The boat's nose touched the shore, and then I listened for the running water from the pipe that led out of the moat. It sounded above me, and with that as a guide I soon found the ring, tied up the boat and stepped out upon the flat rock.

There was just barely room for me to stand, and I had to feel with my hands to find the door in the wall. I tried it, but found it locked.

I knew I was early, as the cathedral clock had not chimed the hour, so I sat down, my back to the wall, to wait.

Several minutes passed, the only sound being the steady fall of water from the drain pipe. It sounded so loud I made up my mind the moat must be overfull, and I doubted if I would be able to hear Valter's footsteps when he came.

As I waited I reloaded the empty chamber in my revolver, and as it snapped closed the cathedral bells rang out the hour.

Ten minutes, perhaps, had passed, but it seemed ages since I had landed. And yet the time I had already spent on the rock was nothing to that which I was still forced to wait, for the gatekeeper failed to come.

For the first five minutes I sat in patience, and then when at least ten minutes more had passed, I rose, unable to endure the suspense longer.

A thousand mad fancies flew through my brain. Now the attack in the garden seemed to point to one thing, and one thing only: that Zergald had learned in some way of our plans.

Either Valter had played us false, or he too was knocked in the head, as Karl and Barnsmurk had been. In such a case quick action was demanded on my part. Yet I waited patiently for five minutes more, and then began to look or feel about me.

The rock on which I stood was no larger than a table, and beyond it on both sides the shore was a mass of huge, rough boulders that afforded no sure footing.

I felt along the wall as far as I could and over the

doorway, but found no projecting stones that would make it possible to climb the wall, which rose twelve feet above me, smooth and unscalable.

I tried the door again, and found it would not give way even to my shoulder. Then I listened, holding my breath and cursing the running water from the pipe, for it prevented my hearing any sound that might have come from within.

Finding my efforts, such as they were, of no avail, I sat down again with what patience I could summon. Still the water ran noisily from the pipe, still my boat bumped and bumped against the rock, but no other sound could be heard. At last the clock across the lake in the cathedral chimed the half hour, and I rose, resolved to do something, though I knew not what.

If I had had an axe or a bar I might have broken in the door, but without some such tool I seemed helpless.

Then suddenly a thought came to me, and I resolved to act upon it. Certainly I was not going to spend the night outside the wall, and already valuable time was being lost.

I dropped back into the boat, and moving to the stern, swung it around until I was nearly under the overflow pipe. I reached out in the darkness and found the pipe was a large one of iron.

How long it was I did not know. It seemed to run straight through under the wall, and certainly the other end could be but half under water, for the stream that flowed through it, while swift, only half filled the pipe.

My mind made up, I took off my coat, wrapped my pistol and extra cartridges inside of it and tied these to

one of the loose seats of the boat. I then climbed back onto the rocks, tried the door again only to find it locked, listened an instant to see if Valter were yet coming, and hearing nothing, climbed over the rocks until I was on top of the pipe.

Then with some difficulty I climbed down until my feet rested on the round bottom of the pipe. The water ran with more force than I had thought, and it was almost impossible to keep my footing. Still, by clinging to the rocks and the edge of the pipe, I was able to let myself down until I was in a sitting position, my feet and legs in the pipe and covered by the water, which rushed against my body with a dull roar; my face was toward the castle. Then slowly I turned myself around, clinging to the rim, but all the time working my body farther in.

The water, thus dammed up, began to run over my back. I reached out, picked up the seat to which my coat and sword were tied, and then slowly began to back my way into the pipe.

I was able to half kneel, and while the water ran up to my chin, my mouth was above the surface.

The seat I dragged after me, holding the rope in my teeth. Speed was essential, for the water was cold and I knew there was great danger that my cartridges and pistol would get wet.

I backed on and on. The pipe seemed longer than I had thought it could be, and the feeling of being in a trap came over me.

The bottom was so slimy that my hands and knees slipped as I worked my way backward. Once my hands

struck a mass of weeds, and I pitched forward, my head going under water. The rope slipped from my teeth, but I grabbed out with my left hand, while I tried to regain my half upright position with my right. By good luck I got hold of the rope again and drew the boat seat back to me.

Thus I worked on, going an interminable distance, as it seemed.

I was soaked through and through, and the cold of the water, heightened by the feeling of being shut up in the pipe, set me shivering all over.

At last, when it seemed as if I had travelled far enough to be half way under the castle itself, my feet slipped over the edge of the pipe, and with an extra effort I pushed my legs out until they hung down in the waters of the moat.

Grasping the rope with my left hand, I reached back, took hold of the edge of the pipe with my right, and catching a deep breath, ducked my head under the water. Then with a shove slipped out into the moat.

It seemed almost light when I pulled my head out from the pipe and looked about me. The castle rose at my back and the wall before me. I was inside at last.

The boat seat I pulled out, tossed it onto the ground above me and climbed up over the end of the pipe. The water ran from me in streams and my boots were full. These I emptied, pulled them on again and unwrapped my coat. It was fairly dry, and after wringing out my shirt I slipped it on.

My revolver I wiped dry, buckled the sword to my belt and looked about me. I was on the side of the moat

under the wall, and the strip of ground was at least twelve feet wide. Counting the width of the wall and the length of the pipe outside, it must have been at least eighteen feet in length.

Down beyond me the light from a window caught my eye, and then suddenly the figure of a man crouching close to the wall passed with a dart through the shaft of light.

I drew back against the wall, pistol in hand, as the fellow came on. In an instant I recognised Valter, but as mistrust was in me for his failure to open the door, I covered him with my revolver.

He stopped beyond me, and I saw he was opening the gate in the wall. I called to him and slipped along to his side.

"You, sir!" he exclaimed, surprised to see me already within.

"Yes. What's the trouble?" I demanded.

"He kept me at work cleaning one of the old dungeons, sir. I just slipped away."

"Is Heinrich within?"

"That's his room, sir, at the light. Her Highness is beyond."

"Did you tell her to expect us?"

"I only had a chance to make a sign to her, but I think she understood."

"Good! Lead me there."

"But the others, sir?"

"They could not come. I'm alone."

"And you, sir"—he touched my arm—"how did you get here?"

"Through the pipe."

I could not see his face, but I felt him start.

"Will you try it alone?" he asked.

"Assuredly. Where are his men?"

"Above. See?" he pointed above my head toward the left wing. "The light is out and they are asleep."

"Any one on guard?"

"No one. Count Heinrich locked up the doors himself. He has the keys."

"Then he suspects nothing?"

"I think not. He just called me from my work, bade me go to bed and went back to his room."

"How do you get in?"

"This way."

He led me around the moat, passed the window from which the light shone and nearly to the front of the castle.

Finally he stopped, leaned down and picked up a long planking.

"There's a pillar of stone in the middle of the moat," he said. "This will reach to it."

He laid it across, picked up another plank from under the wall and walked out over the first one. The second spanned the moat and brought us to a narrow ledge under one of the smaller towers.

"Steps here, sir, and mind they are slippery."

I nodded and followed him up. A small door was at the top and it swung open. In a moment we were within.

As soon as he closed the door I drew him to me.

"Whereabouts are we?" I asked, wishing to get my bearings.

"Down these steps and through a narrow passage, then up on the other side into the main hall, near the great doors."

"Yes," I said, recalling the plans.

"There you turn to your left, and the door to his room is on the same side at the far end."

"And he has the keys?" I asked.

"To all the doors, but I'll wait in the hall and you can go out with her Highness this way to the boat. I left the gate in the wall open."

"That's better," I agreed. "Lead on."

We went down the stairs through a long narrow passage and up on the other side. At the top of the stairs there was a door, and I opened it cautiously and peered out.

The great hall stretched before me, a dim light burning in a pair of antler brackets over a huge fireplace. On the other side, far down, the shadows of a great staircase could be seen.

"Will you need this, sir?" Valter asked, touching me on the arm and holding out a coil of thin but strong rope.

I shook my head.

"There'll be no need of rope," I said.

He asked nothing more, and I pushed the door open slowly. It creaked on its hinges and I paused to see if the sound had attracted attention.

Across the hall, at the far end, the light fell in a shaft from the open door to Heinrich's room.

I pushed the door again and stepped out. As I did so a shadow fell in the light and I drew back close to the wall and behind a suit of armour.

The shadow lengthened and Heinrich stepped into the hall.

He stood for an instant, looking about him, and then crossed on tiptoes to the foot of the stairs. He peered up into the blackness overhead, listened for a moment and then walked back.

"I don't trust the rascals," he muttered as he went into his room.

I watched his shadow as he crossed the floor, and then I heard him move out a chair and sit down.

"He's at his desk," Valter whispered. "He's always there—it's straight in from the door."

"And the light," I asked, "where is it?"

"Over his head."

"Good," I said, and stole down the hall.

I stopped twice to listen, and then in two more steps was at the side of the door.

I could hear Heinrich's pen scratching on the paper.

Carefully I turned back the wet cuffs about my wrists, cocked my revolver, and stepped softly into the doorway.

Half way across the room, bending over some papers, with the full light of a large lamp shining on him, sat Heinrich of Vankle.

CHAPTER XXIX

SHARP WORDS AND SHARPER SWORDS

For possibly thirty seconds I stood there, looking into the room, where under the bright light over the desk Heinrich sat busily writing.

It was not over a half minute, I am sure, and yet in that short time the cool deliberation and action which had prompted my movements up to then gave way to anger.

Whenever I had met Heinrich, no matter under what circumstances, I had in a way found myself attracted by something in his manner. There was a reckless daredeviltry about him in approaching a subject that appealed to me, for the man who flaunts danger or plays with consequences is likable for the very risk he seems to be taking. Now, however, all such liking vanished, and my blood boiled with a desire to strike him down where he sat.

Beyond him, through a door in deep shadow, was Hilma, and that this man could have brought her here and so calmly sit as her gaoler, made every nerve in my body quiver and my muscles draw taut.

I half raised my pistol and then lowered it, for while I longed to end him and his vile tricks and plottings with one single shot, a shot easy to make, I feared the outcome of such an act. I might have finished Heinrich, but I surely would have brought his dozen blackguards down about me from the floor above.

Caution was demanded, if I was to accomplish Hilma's release, and so I was forced to deal with him not as I might wish, but as would best serve our purpose.

The hot blood rushed to my face, and, goaded by the knowledge that I could not with one shot finish the vilest one of them all, I found myself striving for sane thought, and a way to accomplish the thing that seemed so near and yet so far from final completion.

Then the fear that Heinrich might look up drove the cold beads of perspiration to my forehead, and I seemed rooted to the spot. With an effort I pulled myself together, gripped my pistol as if to crush it, and at last drove myself to action.

Silently I stepped across the threshold, keeping my eyes on Heinrich and my pistol levelled at his head, and then with my left hand swung the half-opened door closed. If I had to fire now the sound of the shot would be less likely to carry to the upper floor, and yet I dreaded to shoot for fear of such a possibility.

Still keeping Heinrich covered, I groped behind me for the key, but found none. A bolt, however, was on the door, and I shot it home with a feeling of relief and exultation.

The door was heavy, the bolt strong, and even if we raised the heavens before the thing was settled, it would be ended now without interference.

For an instant I watched him. His forehead rested in his left hand and he kept tapping his teeth with his pen. Then he fell to writing again.

It seemed an interminable distance between us, and I could but wonder how many steps I would take before he

heard me and seized the revolver lying on the table before him.

One step—two steps—three—then more. Heinrich wrote on. My revolver covered him, my finger as tight on the trigger as I dared, and almost the dread my nerves would draw taut and without intent it would be fired.

Half the distance was covered. The light burned like a ball of fire in my eyes, but still, his back nearly turned to me, Heinrich wrote on and on.

Then there were only a few feet more, and with a spring my left hand covered the pistol on the table, and Heinrich looked up into the barrel of my revolver.

As I stood there glaring down into his face, my body half over the table, admiration for his nerve took possession of me.

I was the last person he could have expected to see, for surely in his security he had no idea that either Karl or I could be nearer than across the lake.

Yet he looked up without a start or even a tremor, the slight flash of irritation at the interruption instantly gave way as a smile broke out over his face.

"The Meddler again! Really," he leaned back and let his hands drop on the arms of his chair, "you do turn up in the oddest places."

"Stand up!" I ordered.

"What?" he asked, lifting his eyebrows with great insolence.

"Stand up!"

"Really!" he began.

I pushed my pistol into his face till it nearly touched his forehead and repeated my command.

With a shrug he rose to his feet, the smile still on his lips. I picked up his pistol in my left hand and threw open the chamber, turning out the cartridges on the desk.

"A second one?" I demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Turn around!" I ordered.

I felt of his pockets, and making sure I had cut his claws, sat on the edge of the desk.

"Will the Meddler allow me to be seated?" he asked with mock courtesy, glancing at me over his shoulder.

"Sit down!" I answered.

He dropped into the chair again and crossed his knees.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"There's no time."

"Oh, you're going to shoot me in cold blood, like a rat in a trap. It's like you Americans." The smile had left his face and a sneer took its place.

"The keys!" I demanded. "They're not in your pockets. Where are they?"

"Now really," he answered, "you didn't expect to find them, did you?"

"Come," I ordered, "I'll have no delay."

"Well, I haven't them."

"Then you'll find them and before I count ten."

He shook his head.

"I haven't them."

"You lie!"

"If you hadn't the upperhand I'd——"

"Yes," I interrupted, "you've found it so before."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, then we're even on that score."

"But not on a thousand others."

"Pray, what are the thousand?"

"The moved staircase."

"And my keeping your lady love from you?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when I sprang upon him. My hands gripped his throat, and his head went back against the chair with a crash. He must have dared me purposely, for surely he could well remember what effect a similar remark had had upon me.

His hands flew to my wrists, and he made an effort to pull away my fingers. But in an instant his hold relaxed and a look of horror came into his eyes. His mouth opened, his face turned red, then purple, and suddenly his eyes grew larger and seemed ready to pop from their sockets, when I realised I was strangling him.

My hands relaxed and I dropped back onto the table, picking up my pistol again. He still had the keys, and great as was my anger, I did not care for his death, barring its necessity to a carrying out of our purpose.

For a moment he sat there, his eyes on me and his breath coming slowly. Then the flush left his face, he licked his lips and moved uneasily in his chair; but the marks of my fingers were still on his throat.

As soon as he seemed to have his breath again I leaned toward him.

"The keys to that room and the rest of the castle?" I

demanded. "Give them to me quickly, or I'll put a bullet through your head, for I'm in no mood to be played with."

The choking I had given him must have made him realise I was not to be trifled with, for he shot but one glance into my face and pulled open the drawer to the desk. A bunch of keys lay in the corner.

"Hand them out!"

He tossed them onto the table.

"Are they the right ones?"

He nodded.

"Which one unlocks that door?" I asked, motioning toward the room where the princess was.

He pointed to a large key of brass.

I picked up the bunch by the one indicated and held it out to him.

"Take it!" I ordered.

He looked at me in doubt.

"You are to unlock that door," I explained. "Leave the key in the door, step into the room and go at once to the farther side."

He nodded and took the key.

"One moment," I said as he rose to his feet. "If you make a false move, you can count on a bullet in your head. And when you're in that room, thank God, if you've got the heart, that I've let you live."

"I've got no choice," he answered.

"None whatever," I said. "Now go ahead, but be careful you walk straight and make no slip, for I'll not stop to ask questions."

I rose to my feet; Heinrich nodded, stretched himself

like a cat, picked up the bunch of keys by the largest one and moved toward the door.

"If that key doesn't unlock the door, get the right one now," I cautioned.

"It unlocks it," he answered. And with my pistol at his back walked across the room.

As he started to put the key in the lock I stopped him.

"Knock on the door," I ordered.

He did so.

"Who's there?" demanded the princess instantly.

The sound of her voice set my heart to beating like a triphammer.

"It's I. Are you ready to go?"

"You? Oh! You! Yes!" she exclaimed eagerly. "Yes, I am ready. Open the door."

"Count Heinrich will open the door," I explained. "As soon as he does so step to one side that he may enter. The instant he steps in you step out. Do you understand?"

"Yes," the princess answered.

"All right," I said. "Now unlock the door."

Heinrich thrust the key into the lock without a word and turned it, but the bolt failed to shoot back.

"It's the wrong key!" I exclaimed.

"No," he answered, looking at me with great frankness, "it's not. The lock is old and the key has to be put in just so."

"Well, you ought to know. Hurry!"

He fumbled at the lock, putting in the key with apparent care, trying it and then shaking his head.

I stood over him, my pistol lowered a bit, I fear, in my eagerness to see the bolt turned back.

He worked with great pains, and I felt he was trying his best. Yet my impatience grew as he delayed, and I longed to take a hand at it myself.

"Curse the thing!" he exclaimed, and crouched down so that his eyes were on a level with the keyhole.

"You can get it now!" I said.

"Yes," he answered, as I leaned over him to watch his efforts. I might have known he was a man to suspect when he seemed the most honest, but I failed to think of him longer as my prisoner, and my revolver hung at my side, instead of covering his head, as it should.

He shifted slowly, still working at the lock until he half faced me.

"The light!" he explained, and glanced up at it over his shoulder.

I followed his eyes, and the next instant he was on me with a wild laugh of exultation.

From his crouching position he sprang straight at my waist, like a tiger, and the blow carried me back nearly off my feet. His arms were twined about me, pinning mine close to my sides so that I was unable to use my pistol. His head was buried in my stomach, and had struck me hard enough to nearly knock the wind out of me.

The suddenness of the attack carried me half across the room before I pulled myself together to offer any resistance. As I caught my breath and threw my weight against him we struck a chair and the two of us went sprawling onto the floor.

My revolver flew from my hand across the room. His

grip was broken, somewhat, and I squirmed from his grasp and was on my feet as he came at me again.

This time I was ready for him, and as he sprang at me I brought tactics learned on the football field into play.

There was no need to tackle high, and I dove in under his arms, striking him about the knees and carrying him back with a rush and suddenness that must have startled him.

He was lighter than I, and with my arms around his legs he was powerless.

Over he would have gone, for I lifted him off his feet, had we not struck the heavy writing table. We carried it before us, sending the paper, pens, pencils and ink-pots flying, and Heinrich went over onto the other side as my hold on him broke, my hands coming in contact with the table leg so sharply that I thought for a moment the bones in my fingers were broken.

Both of us gained our feet at the same instant, and stood glaring at one another from opposite sides of the overturned table, while our breath came in short gasps.

Suddenly a pounding sounded on the door, and the princess called:

"What's the matter? What is it? What's happened?"

"He's got away from me, that's all."

"I'm giving your champion a bit more trouble than he expected," Heinrich shouted with a nasty laugh.

The table, which was a large one, formed a barrier between us. If I passed to one side he would go to the other. My pistol lay somewhere behind me, but I dared not look around to see if I could reach it.

"I'll make terms even now," Heinrich offered.

"To hell with your terms!" I answered. "I'm going to wring your neck."

"Don't let your anger get the best of you. Discretion's the better part of valour," he cautioned, laughing gaily at my sharp reply.

I knew he was right, but I had no patience to listen to reason then.

I watched him like a hawk, ready to take advantage of any opening he might give me. If it was to be a free-for-all rough-and-tumble encounter, as it certainly seemed, I had no doubt of ending him, for my training under the crimson colour had made me quite fit for such tactics.

Suddenly my eyes fell on his empty revolver, and as he flung some slur at me I seized it and hurled it at his head. We were no more than five feet apart, and he had barely time to dodge. And yet he failed to get clear of it, for the butt caught him in the temple, cutting an ugly gash.

"You hound!" he shrieked, his face growing black with anger, as he sprang to his right, snatching a sword from the top of a book-case.

In an instant he was around the table and at me. As he came on I whipped out my rapier and met his wild lunge with a cool parry.

I think he meant to beat me down at the very start by the fury of his attack, for he fought recklessly and like one possessed.

I gave way before him, around the room back and forth, while he pressed on, cursing all the time like one gone mad. The blood from the cut on his temple trickled down across his cheek and his white face looked hideous.

I brought tactics learned on the football field into play.

It was one of us now, and I saw that he was by far the better swordsman. I could only hold him back by keeping my head and depending upon his temper making him so reckless that I would get a chance to strike home.

I could see from his face that he was surprised at my ability to hold him off, and greater anger came to him because he could not reach me.

At last, however, I began to weaken, and I found my fingers where they had struck the table growing numb as I gripped my sword.

Once her Highness called out, and I answered her with what courage I could. She, of course, could hear the steel upon steel and his oaths.

"Yes," Heinrich shouted as I bade her have good courage, as I would soon open the door, "yes, he'll open the door yet—the door to hell."

The words angered me, and I pressed the fight on my part for a few minutes so recklessly that he caught my right arm near the elbow, then near the shoulder, opening two nasty wounds that bled and stung like fire.

"Blood for me, you hound!" he shrieked. "Blood for me!"

On he came now, mad that he had wounded me, and I never saw such swordplay in my life. I realised I was getting tired, and that I must finish him quickly, or he would me.

He saw the look on my face and laughed.

"I've got you, you cur! I've got you!"

I fought back madly. My arm burned and ached; the light seemed to dance as we passed under it, and then as I sprang back to avoid a thrust, my heel

struck a corner of the overturned table and I stumbled backward.

With a rush and mad cry of delight he was on me, and I saw his long blade flash at my throat.

I threw up my guard, and then with a cry he reeled, the whole weight of his mad lunge carrying him on. His sword flew up, grazing my cheek, while he pitched forward and went down as the pencil upon which he had stepped rolled from under his boot. His head crashed against the sharp corner of the table and with a groan he tumbled in a heap.

I staggered, reached out to the wall behind me, regained my balance, and stood panting.

Before me lay Heinrich of Vankle unconscious.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PAPERS AGAIN

So fierce had been the fight while it lasted, and so suddenly had come the end, that I stood leaning against the wall, my breath coming in short gasps and my eyes resting fascinated on Heinrich, lying on the floor before me.

Then I felt the warm blood trickling across my left cheek, and I put up my hand to find it covered with blood and my face laid open. It seemed as if I was as near gone as Heinrich, but while the wound in my cheek flowed freely, it was in reality only the outer skin that the point of his sword had caught, tearing open my face for three inches or so.

Stillness reigned where we had fought so madly before. Heinrich lay half under the overturned table, his face white, the blood flowing from the cut in his forehead. On the other side of the room three chairs lay on their sides, the rugs were kicked about, while under Heinrich's feet lay a half-dozen pencils, any one of which might have sent him sprawling, and so saved me.

I looked half dazed on the room, and then glanced at my coat. The right sleeve was ripped open, sticky and damp with blood.

Then suddenly I heard a faint knocking on the door, and I came to myself. The princess had heard all, and now at the sudden silence must be waiting half mad with doubt.

Need for action seized me, and I forgot my wounds, which nearly drove me faint, forgot my anger and only thought of her and the reason I had come.

I clapped a handkerchief to my cheek, and the wound stung as I wiped the blood from it. Then with a word to her that I was safe, I knelt cautiously at Heinrich's side to see if he were really unconscious or shamming.

His coat I threw open and felt of his heart. It was still beating, though slowly, and he breathed heavily. There was no question but what he was stunned.

Satisfied of this, I started to drag him to one side, where Hilma could not see him as she came out, when from the inside pocket of his coat an envelope slipped to the floor.

With a cry I seized upon it. One hurried glance satisfied me it was the same envelope Karl had given me, the one I had turned over to the countess in London—the goal for which we had striven so hard.

I thrust it into my pocket and sprang to my feet, my heart leaping fast in the thought of such an outcome to our task—one far beyond our expectations. Then I stopped, held to the spot by the sound of footsteps overhead.

I sprang across the room, turned the key; it unlocked the door easily, and I saw where I had been tricked.

"Thank God you're safe!" the princess cried as she rushed to me. And then she gave a smothered cry like a frightened animal at the blood on my face.

"It's nothing," I said almost roughly, as she tried to take my handkerchief from me. "Come! There is some one astir, and we must move quickly."

"Heinrich?" she asked.

And then before I could answer her she saw him lying there like one dead, the blood flowing from his head. The overturned table, chairs and rugs met her eyes, and she cried out in horror at the sight.

"He's not dead," I hastened to assure her as she drew back, her hands covering her face. "But come! We must hurry."

"Can you?" she asked, turning to me again.

"Yes! Yes!" I cried. "I'm not hurt. The blood's nothing, only a scratch. It's not pretty, I know, but come."

We hurried across the room, threw back the bolt, and silently I opened the door a crack. No sound came from the hall as I listened, so I moved forward cautiously and stepped out.

As I did so a heavy pike flashed from the right of the doorway, and I jumped back only in time to miss receiving the blow on the head. Instead, it caught me across the wrist and nearly broke it.

With a cry to the princess I shot back the bolt. I had seen enough to note that there was but one fellow in the hall, but I realised as the pike swung I had ventured forth without any weapon at all.

I rushed for my pistol and then back to the door.

"Don't chance it," the princess beseeched as I started to draw the bolt.

"I must get him," I whispered, "before he arouses the others. There's only one. If there had been more they would have rushed the door when I opened it."

She nodded.

"Stand back to the right," I said, "and when I call be ready to follow quickly. We have no time to lose."

"The light!" she cautioned. "He'll see your shadow."

I nodded, and in an instant had crossed the room and blown out the lamp.

Quietly I moved the bolt back and opened the door a crack. Now, thanks to the princess's suggestion, no shaft of light betrayed the opening of the door, nor could the man mark my movements by my shadow, as I had Heinrich earlier in the evening.

Instead, the dim light over the fireplace threw his shadow across the floor in front of the door, and I could see that he was still crouching at the right, his club ready.

Softly I closed the door and whispered to Hilma. She nodded at the part I bade her take, but her hand fell on my arm and she again urged me to take no risk.

"It's the only way."

"I suppose so," she said, "but—but God be merciful."

"Amen!" I said, and turned to the door.

Slowly I stepped across the threshold, and Hilma closed the door all but a crack behind me. Through that crack she was to watch and throw it open again if I had to retreat.

I watched the silent shadow for an instant. It did not move. With a spring I was in the middle of the hall clear of his club, my revolver levelled at his head.

"God help me, sir!" he exclaimed. "I thought it was Count Heinrich."

It was Valter.

I drew a breath of relief and almost burst into a laugh

at the look of consternation on the poor fellow's face.

My mirth was cut short, however, for he gave a cry and pointed up the stairs, where a half-dozen faces were peering down over the balustrade. One look convinced me that we had no time to lose, and I called to the princess to come quickly.

Like an arrow she darted out of the doorway to my side.

Her appearance seemed a signal to those on the stairs, for they set up a shout, and I saw pistols flash in their hands as they came down the steps with a bound.

"In here!" Valter shouted, and rushed back into the room we had just quit.

But I had no mind to go back, and grabbing Hilma about the waist, started down the hall.

Two shots rang out, but the bullets flew wild.

"Into the door that's open!" I cried to the princess, and turned on the men behind. They had just reached the foot of the stairs, and as I fired quickly drew up, hesitated, and sprang behind the corner of the fireplace to return my fire.

Her Highness called to me, and I moved backward quickly, keeping the rogues covered with my revolver. Twice one stuck his head out, fired wildly and dodged back.

I answered the last shot and hurried into the doorway beside the princess.

Her hand fell on mine as I pulled the door to, and I noted it was as steady as a plumb.

"What now?" she asked as quietly as if we were playing a game and not tempting life and death.

I felt first for a bolt to the door, but found none.

"Go on!" I said. "The steps lead down and straight through a narrow passage, then up. I'll hold them back for a moment, if they try to follow. Go! I'll join you in an instant. We're safe now, for the boat lies beyond."

She took the matches I handed her, and I heard her feel her way into the dark passageway. Then I opened the door a crack and peered out.

A dozen men were grouped about the foot of the stairs, talking excitedly.

Suddenly one of them thought of Heinrich and mentioned his name. Instantly they all made a rush for the room we had just left, and as I turned the princess stepped to my side.

"You?" I exclaimed. "Go on! Go on! I'll follow."

"The passageway turns to the left a little ways beyond. You said it went straight."

"Turns?" I questioned. "It must go straight on."

A murmur of voices sounded in the hall and I wheeled again, opened the door a crack and glanced out.

To my horror, Heinrich of Vankle stood in the middle of the hall, leaning weakly against a huge fellow who was tying up his head.

For an instant I stood fascinated, watching him.

"There! The cursed blood's out of my eyes. Give me a pistol, you damned cur!" he shrieked. "Which way did he go?"

"That door there," one answered.

"The second from the end?" he asked, standing where he was and swaying unsteadily on his feet.

"Yes, the second."

My heart almost stopped beating at the answer, for I knew I had come into the hall by the first door from the end. Where the passage led to that we were in I could not say. There was but one thing to do, however, and that was to take it, and as quickly as we could, with the hope it would yet bring us to the open air.

Cursing the door that there was no bolt on it, I seized Hilma about the waist and hurried down the passage and into the darkness.

Down the steps we flew, and my heart leaped when I found that our feet soon struck level flags. Perhaps we were yet on the right road, even if it had turned sharply to the left, a fact I did not remember noticing as I came in.

"We must hurry," I cautioned. "You go on as fast as you can. I'll bring up the rear." The passage was not wide enough for us both to walk side by side.

She flew on, but soon fell with a cry. I seized her in my arms and lifted her to her feet.

"It's nothing," she whispered. "The steps."

Up the steps we went, and they seemed never to end. I knew then that we were wrong, for I had not come down so many when entering.

Yet there was nothing to do but go on, for already the sound of footsteps could be heard behind us.

Suddenly my feet fell on level flags again, and I saw the grey outline of two windows in the walls.

We were in a room and above the ground, but where in the huge castle I could not say.

The princess drew near me.

"We have missed our way?" she asked.

"We'll come out yet," I answered. Already I could hear our pursuers below on the stairs.

"Look about the room, if you can, while I keep them back," I whispered to her.

I moved to the doorway through which we had entered and strained my eyes to see how many were following us.

"Go on, damn you!" I heard Heinrich order.

"Get a light!" some one else answered.

"To show him where to shoot?" Heinrich jeered. "Go on!"

On came the steps, and when I felt they must be half way up, I fired twice.

The shots sounded like the explosion of a bomb in the narrow walls of the passage, and as they rang out a scream echoed on the stair below, while I heard some one fall heavily.

As I fired I sprang back from the door, and instantly an answering shot and then another came from those below.

In the last flash I saw a dozen men grouped about the foot of the stairs, looking up in blank amazement.

I fired again and again, and my bullets found their mark, for screams and oaths answered the reports. Reloading, I waited, and then I heard Heinrich cursing his men.

"Curse you cowards!" he cried, mad with wrath. "Go on, or I'll shoot you instead of him! Go on, you fool, go on! There is but one."

Angry shouts answered his words, and in the babble the princess slipped to my side.

"The stairs go on from the other side and there is an iron door."

"Has it bolts?" I demanded.

"I can't move it, it's so heavy."

"Stand here back of the wall while I see. If they come up cry out."

I sprang across the room. Opposite the stairs there was a huge door, as Hilma had said. I pulled at it, but it would not move. Glancing over my shoulder to make sure Heinrich and his followers were still below, I threw all my weight against it. It was of solid iron and oak, at least two inches thick, and it took all my strength to even start it.

As I pulled the wounds in my right arm stung like fire, and suddenly a great dizziness seized me. I should have fallen had I not clung to the door.

Yet I had moved it, and with another effort, that set my arm to bleeding afresh, I managed to close it. Then I pulled it open so that one could slip through, and hurried back to Hilma's side, though my head went all dizzy and I nearly fell as I let go the door.

"Some one is coming up," she cautioned.

"Slip by the door and go up stairs," I whispered.

All was silence as I moved backward toward the other side of the room.

Suddenly a shot rang out, and I felt a hot stinging sensation in my left arm. In the flash of the pistol I saw a huge fellow on the top step.

I fired instantly, but he came on. Again I fired, and so did he. Still he made across the room, and in the flash

I saw a dozen behind him in the doorway, staring about as if undecided which way to move.

The one in the lead was now so close that I could feel the rush of air from his body. I fired twice, this time at his face, as I caught a sight of it in the dim light from the windows, and with a scream that echoed in the narrow walls he went down at my very feet.

The room was heavy with smoke, and the loud reports of our pistols still rang in my ears.

There were but two shots left in my revolver, and I fired twice into the group by the door as I sprang back.

A dozen shots rang out on the instant and a rain of bullets struck the door as I slipped through.

"Safe!" Hilma whispered. "You are safe, my love."

I thrust the top bolt home, the second, then the third. Again the bullets fell like rain on the door, but it was of thick oak, bound in iron.

"You—" I heard Hilma say, and I felt her hand on my arm. Then the door seemed to fall outward as I grasped it, my wounds burned like fire, while my legs grew suddenly weak and I slipped down, an unconscious heap on the steps.

CHAPTER XXXI

FLAGS OF DISTRESS

First a vague uncertainty seemed to press down upon me. I felt as if a thousand things had happened, that a great wild something, unseeable but large and ever present, had tried to crush me, and then had finally gone away and left my body burning like fire.

Slowly I opened my eyes, realising something soft was under my head. Then I looked about me.

There was a faint light, and in its rays I saw heavy grey walls fading into long shadows.

Across my forehead came a cool touch—I was looking into the princess's eyes and her hand was on my forehead.

For what seemed an endless length of time I lay there and looked into her face. I felt content and I dreaded to move or break the spell.

Her face was pale, and I wondered at it without wondering rather how she could be tending me instead of I her. But her eyes were bright and her hair hung in strange, wild locks, a beauty frame to her face.

She had never been more beautiful, and I looked and looked, and then—I must still have been half mad with the dizziness which had seized me—I murmured, "You! Hilma!" and tried to raise my head.

"Hush!" she said, leaning down and pushing back my

hair. "Hush! There is no danger. The door is strong and they have gone away."

She spoke more to herself than to me, and I felt she did not realise I was in my senses again.

Yet the place we were in suddenly came to me, and I struggled to a sitting position.

As I leaned against the wall—we were on a landing in the stairs, perhaps six feet square—her hand lingered on my arm.

"You must be careful," she whispered.

I felt for my pistol, and she pointed to the step back of us where it lay.

"I loaded it again," she said, in answer to my look.

"Where are they?"

"Gone, I think. I slipped down to the door after I laid you here, and I heard them talking. Heinrich said we were in the flag tower and could not get out, and that he'd go to bed."

I nodded vaguely. "He left some one on guard?" I questioned, looking about me dreamily.

"I think not. Perhaps down the stairs. He might try to get us to come out and fall into a trap."

I nodded, but asked no more questions for a moment, for my head rang like a bell.

A small candle I had brought in my pocket burned on the step, and in its light I could see that my arm had been bandaged. My coat was cut away and white strips tied to keep the blood back. I put my hand to my cheek and felt the dry blood.

"I couldn't do anything to that," the princess said. "Oh, but how you have suffered!"

I shook my head and leaned against the wall, saying nothing. My head still rang, and the light danced if I looked at it. The wall was cool, colder than her hand, but not as soothing.

I knew that I should do something, but it seemed as if I never could move. Then Hilma shivered.

I looked at her as a man might stare if he had just been knocked down and did not realise what had happened him, but when I saw her force a smile to her lips I realised she was cold.

Slowly—no matter what energy I drove into myself I could only move slowly—I rose to my feet.

"Come!" I said; "it's the flag tower. We'll get out of here to the room above; there must be one."

"Can you?" she asked.

"The bit of giddiness has left me," I answered, and stumbled down the stairs to have a second look at the bolts and to listen if any one was working on the door.

But if there had been I should never have heard for the pumping in my ears.

Then I staggered back up the steps. Hilma stood waiting for me, and when I stopped on the step below the landing she held out her hands and our eyes met.

What she had cried out as I shot the first bolt home, that time which seemed so long ago, I saw then in her face.

"The bolts are tight," I said, but I looked deep, deep into her eyes.

"The bolts are shot home," she answered, "and come what may, it shall end but one way."

I looked at her long, her hands holding my arms, half supporting me as I swayed.

"Aye, it shall end but one way now."

There was a light in her eyes as she drew me up the step and to her.

God knows I longed for her arms about me, weak as I was, and yet I forced a play of dizziness, for I had not meant what she had thought.

Up the stairs we started, carrying the half candle, and soon, as to the few steps we climbed but long ages for the pain of each step, we reached a small room with barred windows.

The cool air fanned my cheek, and out from the portal I could see the lake below and far across the lights of Zakbar.

"God grant they come soon to help us," Hilma said as she looked over my shoulder.

"Aye," I answered, suddenly realising we must be rescued. And then I turned sick, for I knew no rescue could come to us.

Heinrich would not allow us to be taken on his hands, and I began to wonder what he would do. Blow up the tower, perchance, or fire the door, beat me down and place the princess in some dungeon.

But my poor brain was too fagged to think long of that, and I turned away from the lights, so far away, yet seemingly so near.

There was a couch in the room and a few chairs. In one corner was a pile of old and dirty flags, long neglected and soiled.

"You lie on the couch," I said. "I'll take the flags

in the corner. No need for either of us to watch, for they can't break down the door without waking us."

"But you are wounded, John," she said softly.

My name on her lips and in such a tone made me long to take her in my arms, and so, with her telling me of her love and I telling her of mine, to rest. Rest was what I craved like mad, and rest with her arms about me would have been the sweetest thing I could have asked for.

"Your Highness needs rest," I answered, steadying my voice. "It is late and we may be wakened any instant."

For a moment she looked at me, as if trying to read my face.

"Your Highness," she said, shaking her head. I saw her lips repeat my words, and she looked again, her eyes pleading as if I had struck her.

"God help me!" I cried, and fell on my knees kissing her hands. "Lie down! lie down! Don't tempt me when I'm dying for your love. Don't tempt me."

Her hand stroked my head, rested on it for an instant, and then with a sigh she turned and threw herself on the rough couch.

I covered her with a long cloak she had brought from her room and two of the flags, and then with one last look blew out the candle and threw myself on the bunting in the corner.

The grey light fell on the floor in two blotches.

"Good-night, my love!" Hilma said softly.

"Good-night—my love——"

"Good-night, my brave and true love," she whispered.

And then sleep, the sleep of exhaustion, came as a mantle to our folly.

Twice in the night I started up, my flesh afire and my head reeling, to find a stillness as deep as that of the wilderness, where in my dreams I had heard the stealthy approach of Heinrich or his men.

Finally I slept, and at last when morning broke and I awoke, I found the fever and dizziness had left me, and only a soreness and great weakness remained.

From the window of the tower I could look across the lake, and there beyond the sparkling waters lay Zakbar. I climbed the remaining steps to the top of the tower, and from there looked out about the surrounding country.

What had happened to Karl and Barnsmurk? Was Kurlmurt cooling his heels, or, rather, tramping up and down there in the castle I could see so plainly, asking what had happened to us?

Truth to tell, my thoughts were many and perplexing that morning, and my brain too tired to think what was best to do.

It had been plainly agreed between us all, when we planned the thing, that an open attack on the castle would avail nothing. In fact, such an attack, we had been sure, would not release the princess, but only bring about an open break with Zergald, which he would be quick to turn to his own advantage.

So now, even if Karl and Barnsmurk had got clear of their assailants in the garden, they and Kurlmurt would hesitate before riding in force to the castle, for if such a course would have availed nothing before, they could not know it was now the only way.

If Karl and Barnsmurk were prisoners, Kurlmurt would

be in the dark and afraid to move for fear of spoiling matters.

An attack in force was the only way we could be rescued, for surely Heinrich had the princess as safe as before. Her prison quarters had simply been changed and to far less comfortable ones.

Thus I turned the matter over as I leaned against the battlement and saw the sun rise on our last day of hope. Thursday it was, and unless rescue came before another day our work would be for naught, as the grand dukes met on Friday.

Already the holiday air of the city, which had been growing the week, would be reaching its climax. All final preparations would be made, and though there was an undercurrent of feeling in some places that something might happen, and a faint hope in others, nothing but the coronation of Prince Joachim would follow unless we could manage some way to get clear of the tower.

What to do? What could be done? My head ached, my arm pained me whenever I moved it. No way to send word to Kurlmurt, no way to clear Heinrich from our path. A day before I might have bribed him, but now, after our personal encounter, nothing could be done.

I crept down the stairs and found the princess sleeping like a child. Then I went on down to the door to see if the bolts were still in place.

As I stood examining them I heard some one in the outer room. Then Heinrich, who had evidently heard my step on the stairs, spoke.

"Does her Highness enjoy her change of quarters?"

For a moment I remained silent, considering whether

it would pay to answer him or not. Then I decided I might possibly gather from his words some hint of his plans, so replied:

"They are certainly preferred."

"Well, I'm glad she's pleased, for I'm quite content. Of course I don't propose to starve either of you, and if you'll open the door a crack I'll let you have a crust."

"Thanks," I answered; "I consider it safer to keep the bolts home."

"As you like," he answered with a laugh. "It will be for three days, and then I suppose Zergald will be inclined to be magnanimous with Joachim crowned."

So then, as I had thought, that was his plan. We were to be held prisoners until after the coronation. My attempt at rescue had ended quite dismally.

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Yes," came the answer.

"How much will you make out of the thing if Joachim is crowned?"

"All I want. But if I was liable to lose I would not consider a deal with you." There was anger in his tone, and then suddenly it all vanished and he laughed. "My head's as sore as your cursed arm can be, but I've got you now. It's not always the one who has the upper hand at the start that wins out."

I saw there was no chance of making terms with Heinrich now, so turned back up the stairs, sick at heart.

"I've got you on the hip," he called after me, "and I would not take any price for my chances. With her Highness and you under lock, Joachim is as good as crowned, and when he is I'll run Scarvania."

And thus confident of his victory, and apparently all enmity gone, he jeered at me for my failure and laughed heartily in his assurance.

As he talked on I waited on the stairs, trying to think of some means of escape. Once I was tempted to throw back the bolt and have the thing out again. If I could have swung the heavy door open quickly, and before he could make out my purpose, I think I would have risked it. With him out of the way, I felt sure I could hold off or bribe his men.

But such a thing was out of the question, and I put the scheme aside as quickly as I thought of it.

Then finally, Heinrich bade me a hearty good-morning, and went on, as he said, to a delightful breakfast, leaving two of his men on guard.

I climbed back up the stairs, my heart heavy. A few water-soaked crackers were in my pocket, and my flask was three-quarters full. That was our scant ration for three days, and then what would we get?

At the head of the stairs I met Hilma. She looked radiant. Her cheeks were flushed, and as she greeted me she held out a flag, one that I had thrown over her as an extra covering.

"Yes?" I questioned.

"My flag!" she answered. "Hang it from the tower upside down."

In an instant I caught her idea, and with a spring rushed up the stairs, the flag in hand. In five minutes it was flying, the standard of her royal Highness, the Princess Hilma von Cedra of Rulfburg, upside down, o'er Zergald's castle.

What they who saw it in the city might think I cared not, so long as Kurlmurt or Karl, waiting both of them, I hoped, at the princess's castle, saw and understood.

For ten minutes it floated in the light morning breeze, while we leaned against the granite coping, and with strained and eager eyes watched for some answering signal.

A half hour passed, and then out on the morning breeze across the lake broke the standard of her Highness, upside down. Instantly I sprang to the halyard and dipped our flag thrice. The answer came back.

"It means rescue!" I cried.

"Yes," Hilma answered, turning her eager, flushed face to mine. "Yes," and then the light went out of her eyes and the colour died down in her cheeks. "Yes, it means rescue and—I suppose we must be rescued from ourselves."

CHAPTER XXXII

A TEST OF STRENGTH

My elation knew no bounds, for I felt certain Kurlmurt or Karl, or perhaps both, had read our signal and would answer in force.

The danger in such a course gave way before the necessity, for there seemed no other way of our getting clear of the tower unless Heinrich's forces were driven away.

If Zergald had not seen the princess's flag and become suspicious because of its flying over his castle, certainly Kurlmurt could muster a force and reach us before any help could come to Heinrich.

From the flag tower I could look down upon the many towers and turrets of the castle. The moat ran about it and outside of it a high wall. On the side toward the lake the wall was close to the water's edge, then a few feet of ground, then the moat, another few feet of earth and the castle walls.

At the front, the moat ran perhaps twenty feet from the castle wall, but the main entrance reached out like an arm until it touched the edge of the moat. There the drawbridge was built, and I saw that it was down.

From the drawbridge twelve feet of ground stretched to the solid wall of masonry. Opposite the drawbridge were the huge gates, and these were closed and barred.

Kurlmurt would first have to scale the wall, and this

done, the necessity of crossing the moat would arise, for certainly Heinrich would raise the drawbridge as soon as attacked.

At any point the attacking force would be open to a merciless fire from the castle.

As I surveyed the grounds and figured out the practical impossibility of success, my spirits fell, and though I said nothing to Hilma, I feared that any attempt at rescue would go hard.

The morning wore away and still no sign came of Kurlmurt or Karl. A half dozen times I travelled to the door and each time I could hear the sound of voices on the other side. Once as I listened Heinrich came into the room where the guard was placed, and after asking one or two questions as to whether I had attempted any move went away.

I had seen no messenger leave the castle, so felt reasonably sure Heinrich had sent no word to Zergald of what had transpired.

As the day wore on my wounds began to trouble me again, and the fever which had left me during the night returned. My head grew dizzy, and the princess, noticing my flushed face, forced me to lie down on the couch.

Hilma herself seemed to have suffered no shock from the trying night, and was as fresh and natural as if she were in her own home and not in danger of her life.

Her gaiety of manner had, it is true, left her, and though she spoke confidently of our speedy rescue, her eyes never looked into mine nor did she refer to that which must have been first on her mind. Both of us, I think, felt that matters were cast in a mould and Fate

must have its way. The end, be what it might, was only ours to accept when it came, not ours to discuss or try to shape.

I had, I fear, fallen into a feverish doze when the princess, who was on the tower, called me.

I rushed up the stairs, and following her look, saw far off on the high road at the upper end of the lake, a body of horsemen. There were at least twenty of them, I should say, and they were coming on at a hard gallop.

We watched them as best we could. At one time the trees shut them out, at another we could see them on the open road, and finally I made them out.

"It's Kurlmurt!" I said, speaking for the first time.

"And Karl too!" Hilma answered.

I nodded, for while I was not sure, I felt I had recognised both Karl and Barnsmurk. If they were with Kurlmurt, the outcome of the fight in the garden was more favourable than I had expected.

On the body of men came, and then for five minutes disappeared into the woods, only to burst forth again a mass of steaming, blowing horses, that pulled up at the wall.

Heinrich and his men must have been asleep, for no sign came from the castle. I waved to Kurlmurt and called.

They looked up, and a mighty shout rent the air when they saw Hilma at my side.

"We've the door bolted against them," I called. "It's the second door on the left as you enter the hall."

The wind carried my voice, and Karl, for Karl and Barnsmurk both were there in the front rank, Barns-

murk with his left arm in a sling, Karl with his head in bandages, waved back his hand as a sign they understood.

Then as we two stood staring at each other, Heinrich stepped out upon a balcony below us and glanced first up at the princess and myself, then down at Kurlmurt and his followers.

I might have shot him where he stood, but was so intent on what would follow that I never thought of the opportunity his position offered.

The look on Heinrich's face was one of surprise, then of mirth.

"Open your gates!" Kurlmurt thundered.

Heinrich looked up at me with a shrug of his shoulders, as much as to say: Pray whoever heard such a ludicrous request.

"Open!" Kurlmurt thundered again.

"I'll shoot you and your men like dogs," Heinrich answered, speaking for the first time, "if you try to force the castle."

"Open in the name of the law!" Kurlmurt ordered.

"Law!" Heinrich jeered back. "No one knows you. The law of Scarvania rests with the Grand Duke of Zergald and no other."

The answer set Kurlmurt wild with anger.

"I'll blow your walls to bits and hang you for a traitor and a scoundrel," Kurlmurt answered him back.

"And I'll have you banished by his Majesty, King Joachim, day after to-morrow," Heinrich replied with a laugh.

With this final shot he stepped back and disappeared within the castle.

Then we all seemed to come to life.

"Is there any way in?" Karl called to me.

I shook my head.

Kurlmurt gave some order, and instantly several horsemen rode up close to the wall and tried from the backs of their mounts to reach the top.

As if to warn them that such an attempt would only cost them their lives, a half-dozen shots rang out, sending rough bits of masonry of the top of the wall down upon the heads of Kurlmurt and his men.

And then, as if to doubly prove the folly of an attack, the drawbridge with much groaning and rattling of chain was slowly drawn up.

Silence fell on the castle and on Kurlmurt and his men.

"What can they do?" the princess asked suddenly.

Before I could answer I noted straight below us a shadow on the waters of the moat. I looked again, and saw that it was Valter.

Up to now the fellow had escaped my mind, but the sight of him renewed my hopes, and as I saw him creep slowly toward the gate I thought I divined his purpose.

The drawbridge might be up, but if once Kurlmurt could get within the walls it might be possible, with Valter as a guide, to enter as I had.

Raising my voice, I called as loud as I could, and Karl ran out into the open and looked up.

"Dismount!" I called. "Dismount!" and I pointed to the gate.

More I dared not say, yet it was enough, for they all tumbled off their horses and gathered in close to the wall, out of sight of the castle.

Karl remained where he could see us, waiting for me to call again.

By this time Valter had crept on some dozen feet, and as I called again to Karl he looked up and waved his hand, pointing behind him as if to indicate that the entrance he and I had used was the one he planned to lead Kurlmurt to. I nodded, and waved my hand to him that I understood.

Then suddenly a shot rang out, and I saw the bullet strike over Valter's head. Heinrich had discovered him.

At the shot the fellow's caution vanished. Like a deer he sprang forward toward the gate, while shot after shot followed and the bullets struck about him.

He moved too quickly or the shots were fired too hurriedly to fall true. The danger would come when he paused at the gate to throw back the bolts and bars.

Karl called to me to know what was going on.

"The gates will open!" I cried. "Left wheel when you enter," and I pointed to his left.

"Left wheel!" he called back, and drawing his sword, sprang toward the gates, where under the high wall he was lost to view with the others.

By now Valter was close to the gates, and then suddenly he stumbled and fell. He was up again with a bound, and as he reached them he threw back the first bolt.

"Keep moving!" I cried to him.

Two bolts swung back, and a dozen bullets fell about the fellow.

Either Heinrich's men were poor marksmen or they had a bad vantage point from which to fire.

Then suddenly Heinrich sprang out upon the balcony below us. From the way in which he glanced about, I judged he had been elsewhere in the castle and knew nothing of Valter's attempt to open the gates until the moment he stepped out upon the balcony, summoned by the firing.

"He'll kill him!" the princess cried as Heinrich raised his pistol.

Then I awoke from my apathy and opened fire on Heinrich.

My first bullet flew true, for with an oath he wheeled to look up at me as his pistol fell from his hand.

My bullet had struck his fingers, and the blood poured from them as he turned upon me.

Again I fired, but as I did so he sprang through the window into the castle.

"Force the gates!" I cried, as I saw Valter unable to pull back the last bolt.

Then a shot rang out again, and Valter threw up his hands and pitched forward.

"They've killed him!" Hilma cried.

For the first time I seemed to realise the princess was watching at my side, and I ordered her roughly to go into the tower.

"He's not dead! He's not dead!" she cried again, paying no attention to my words. Then Valter got to his feet and darted back along the wall, as he had come.

A sudden lull followed, and then Karl ran out where I could see him and called to me.

"Force the gates! Force the gates!" I cried.

With a shout Kurlmurt and his men charged forward.

The right gate sprung open a bit at the top, and yet the bottom bolt still held.

"Again! Again!" I cried, and the princess added her voice to mine.

The top opened a gap further. Then some one forced in a stout stick, and with that as a pry, the right gate gave way and flew open with a crash.

Half the men were thrown forward on their faces, and as a dozen shots rang out, two lay where they had fallen.

"To the left!" I cried, and Kurlmurt and Karl dashed the way Valter had fled, with nearly twenty men behind them.

The whole thing had happened far more quickly than I have told it, and silence reigned suddenly where before all had been confusion.

I chafed to be idle, and then suddenly determined to join the fight myself.

Drawing Hilma with me, we hurried down the steps to the door.

"You can close the bolts after me," I whispered.

"Don't! Don't!" Hilma urged. "They'll not need you."

"Hush!" I said, slipping back the bolts silently.

Two men were in the room, both with their backs to me, watching from one of the small windows what was going on below.

To shoot a man in cold blood is not to my liking, but at that moment I fear the thought of not taking advantage of the chance never occurred to me.

"Close the bolts after me," I whispered to the princess.

She nodded and drew back.

I opened the door, raised my pistol and fired.

Without a word one fellow went down, and the other, as I sprang through the door, fled down the stairs.

I heard the door close and the bolts slid home, and then I rushed on down.

I ran on with but one purpose, to reach Heinrich before any one else had a chance to settle with him finally for what he had done.

Ahead of me was the second guard, and as we reached the stairs that led up into the hall I fired at him.

I was bounding up the stairs, and my pistol rang out three times. The third shot struck home as he threw open the door, and he fell with a cry into the hall.

I sprang over his body and stood staring about me.

Kurlmurt was in the far corner. Karl I could not see, but about the stairs a dozen of Heinrich's men held back Kurlmurt's followers.

Pistols had been discarded, and each one fought madly, desperately with his sword.

Heinrich I looked for somewhere among the fighting, swearing men.

Then suddenly I became conscious of two at my right, and I looked up to see Barnsmurk against the wall, holding off a huge fellow. His left arm being in a sling placed him at a disadvantage, but he fought desperately, yet I at once realised he was too weak to withstand the other.

Whipping out my sword, I sprang between them, and with strength born of madness drove the other fellow's guard down and my sword home.

"Come!" I cried in Barnsmurk's ear, pushing him into the doorway, "down there and into the tower to her Highness."

As Barnsmurk disappeared a cry went up from the stairs, and Heinrich's men rushed down, driving our forces back by sheer weight.

Then I saw Heinrich at one side, fighting with some poor devil who was no match for him.

Some one blocked my way, and I was forced to fight and beat the man down before I could pass.

By then our men had driven the others back, and a cry went up from Karl, who I now saw in the front of the fight, that we had won.

"Aye! Won! Won! Won!" I shouted, and made for Heinrich.

He saw me coming, but at the same instant realised his men were beaten and that the few left were taking to their heels up the stairs.

As I made for him he raised his pistol and fired. The bullet went wild and I laughed at him for his poor aim; fired myself with no better luck and then rushed on, my sword drawn.

"Once again!" I cried, "and this time no table."

He glanced about, and seeing he had lost, started down the hall.

I called to him to stand, and he turned and waited for me. A smile was on his face, his sword held ready, but as our blades met he jumped back quickly, and with an oath flung his empty pistol straight into my face.

For an instant I held my feet. I saw him turn, wave his hand at me and call out:

"If I had another bullet—" Then he disappeared into a doorway on the right, while I, staggering under the blow, followed him a half-dozen steps, clutched at the empty air, and pitched forward upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GRAND DUKES DECIDE

When I came to a realising sense of myself, I hesitated before opening my eyes.

I knew I was in a bed, that a cool bandage was drawn tightly across my forehead; that the softness of the pillow was a relief, and the cool sheets were pulled up under my chin.

Then I moved my right hand and my left, and finding them still intact, opened my eyes.

I was in my own room at the inn, Karl was leaning against the mantel staring at the pile of logs on the andirons.

His head was bandaged, as it had been when he rode up to the castle.

"Halloo!" I said.

He turned with a glad cry and sprang across the room.

"Thank Heaven, John, you're alive!"

"Alive!" I echoed; "of course I am."

"Thank Heaven!" he said again, staring at me as if I was a ghost. "The doctor said you would wake true as a die."

"What day is it?" I demanded.

"Friday."

"Then it was——"

"Yes, it was yesterday. Does it seem so long ago?"

"And Hil—her Highness?"

"Safe! thanks to the bravest man in the world."

"A lot of good I did, shut up there in the tower, but you and Barnsmurk. How did you come out from that scrap in the garden?"

"With this lump on the head. Barnsmurk had a bullet in his shoulder."

"They didn't get you, then?"

"No. The people from the inn scared them away or they would have."

"And after that what happened?"

"We nearly died with impatience until you raised the princess's flag."

"You saw it?"

"I was at the castle, and I raised the one in answer."

"Valter led you in?"

"Yes. He's at her Highness's with a bullet through the back."

"Yes, I saw him get it," I said.

"We—" Karl went on, hesitating a bit, "brought you here for—well—she—her Highness wanted to take you to her castle, but Kurlmurt and I—" the poor fellow stopped in utter confusion.

"Yes," I said, nodding, understanding what he was trying to say.

"She wasn't satisfied and—well—you know when she came down from the tower and saw you—she insisted upon seeing you, though we tried to keep her away—well, she said some things that it was lucky only Kurlmurt and I heard."

I said nothing, but looked at him.

"Yes," Karl went on, looking away, "she spoke to you—you were insensible, of course."

"Of course," I answered as indifferently as I could.

"She thought you were dead."

I nodded slowly.

"And she spoke to you as she said she had the night before."

"She shouldn't have done so," I answered, looking away.

"She thought you were dead," Karl said, as if defending her, "and she told us how you had refused to let her do what she wished."

I moved uneasily, for I could not see why he was telling me this.

"And Kurlmurt swore you were worthy of her."

At that I turned upon him, anger in my eyes. Why did he think it necessary to make the thing still harder?

My look must have been a question, for he came closer to me and took my hand.

"Your reward will be small, John," he said, looking deep into my eyes. "It's a hard task to listen to what I'm telling you—harder, perhaps, than the fight you've just been through, but some day you'll be glad I told you. Later, perhaps, I couldn't, when—when she is our queen; but know now that she told you of her love; that she kissed you and called you her own when you were insensible. And Kurlmurt swore you were a king, and I know you are. Some day, perhaps, you'll be glad I told you this—when I could."

For a long minute I held his eyes and gripped his hand. The sting was gone now, and then I thanked

him silently for telling me what he had, as I have so often since.

He stood there saying nothing more, and silently I pressed his hand again and dropped it.

"Where's Heinrich?" I demanded, turning away my head.

"Got away. Took your boat."

For a long time I lay there, pondering over what had transpired the last twenty-four hours, but more of what Karl had just told me, and then suddenly it came to me that it was Friday the Fourth of July, and the day the grand dukes met to formally approve of the one to be crowned on the morrow.

"What time is it?" I demanded.

Karl looked at his watch.

"Three o'clock."

"What time do the grand dukes meet?"

"Three o'clock."

"Then what in Heaven's name are you doing here? Isn't her Highness going before them to press her claim?"

"Yes," he replied, turning to the open window.

"Well, your place is there, isn't it?" I demanded.

"I was staying with you."

"Why?"

"Why?" Karl asked in some surprise.

"Yes, why? Because I need watching? Are you afraid to trust me, or why is it you hang over me as a guard?"

I dare say I was a bit off my head or I would not have spoken as I did. The poor fellow looked hurt at my

words, and I've no doubt he was, for they were uncalled for and unjust.

"You're a bit wild yet from your wounds. You'd better sleep," Karl said.

"Forgive me," I said lamely. "I'm not right, I suppose, but you go out of here. I'm all right. You go—hurry! Your place is with her. Go!"

For a minute he hesitated and shook his head.

"Go!" I ordered.

"She'll not like it."

"Go, and say I sent you."

"But you——"

"If I've got to stay here in bed, I can do it as well alone as with you."

"But——"

"Go and be damned to you. You're late now."

"If——"

"Go!" I thundered, "or I'll get up."

He was crazy to go and had been all the time, yet would not have left me then had I not begged, sworn and threatened.

"All right," he finally agreed. "A waiter will be in the hall and I'll be back as soon as it's over."

I nodded, pressed his hand and he was gone.

For a half hour, I presume, I lay there half awake and half asleep, for the fever was on me still. Then slowly a cloud seemed to roll from me and my flesh grew cool. Strength came to my limbs and I sat up in bed.

For the first time I felt of my head and found a good sized lump under the neat white bandage, where Heinrich's pistol had caught and knocked me senseless.

Then as an experiment I went over my several wounds, and to my surprise found them easier and the fire gone. In fact, I suddenly felt quite fit but for a slight weakness.

A sudden longing for something to drink came over me, and I determined to test my strength instead of calling the waiter. I put on my slippers, and as I stood up to pull on my wrapper a sound in my sitting-room fell on my ears.

Perhaps it was the excitement and danger of the last few days, perhaps it was my being close to a pistol for hours that made me suspicious on the instant. Grabbing up my revolver, that lay with my sword on a chair nearby, I turned toward the door.

I stole forward slowly.

There, near the window, revolver in hand, listening like a cat, stood Heinrich of Vankle.

My heart gave a leap at the sight of him, and instantly I thrust my revolver into the crack of the door and fired.

My aim was poor, and I knew it the instant I pressed the trigger. The bullet flew wild, and as it smashed the glass to the right of his head he turned and with one bound dashed through the door out onto the balcony and was gone.

In an instant more I had the landlord and a half-dozen waiters pounding at my bedroom door.

I sent the waiters away and let the landlord in.

It was nothing, I explained, only a fellow stealing into my rooms, and I took a shot at him.

The landlord looked at me in some doubt, for while he

knew nothing he was no fool, and must have had many thoughts in his head.

"What could he want, sir?" he asked, closing the door that had been forced open by Heinrich.

"What could he want?" I repeated, suddenly growing cold all over. "Why, the envelope. By God, the documents! The evidence!" I shouted.

For the first time since tearing them from Heinrich's pocket had I remembered them. Like one possessed, I began to search my rooms for the coat I had worn the day before. At last I found it in a corner of my bedroom, where it had been thrown down, and in the inside pocket lay the envelope.

A glance sufficed to assure me that its contents was intact, and then wild with the thought that perhaps already the grand dukes had cast their vote against her Highness, I began pulling on my clothes.

"You're not going out, sir?" the poor landlord shrieked. "The doctor forbade it, and Count von Merlder—he——"

"To the devil with advice!" I cried. "Order me a horse quick! Do you hear me? It's the only way to save her."

"Save who, sir?" he questioned.

"Her Highness! If I don't get to the castle with these papers in five minutes Joachim will be accepted by the dukes."

"Why, sir, of course, sir! I fear you are mistaken, sir!" he muttered. "Of course it will be his Highness, Prince Joachim."

"Man!" I said, steadying my voice, for I saw I must convince the fellow I was in my right mind, "her High-

ness is going to demand the right before Joachim. These documents—" I waved the envelope in his face— "will place her Highness on the throne. Get me a horse!"

One instant he looked at me in doubt, and then, seeming to read sanity in my face, flew out of the room.

How I dressed myself I do not know. The strength that I thought was mine fled and only the excitement bore me up. At last I pulled on my boots, threw a coat over my shirt, and with the envelope in one pocket, my revolver in another, I rushed through the halls, out the door and flung myself into the saddle.

Through the park and down the avenue I thundered, and as I rode into the square, my horse wet with sweat and my whip still cutting his flanks, the clock in the cathedral chimed four.

Details narrow down as to that ride and my entrance into the castle, for it was all one jumble in my head then and now.

In some way I pulled up my horse at the sally-port, flung myself from the saddle, and ran like mad across the court and up the stairs, before the astonished sentinels could gather their senses.

I knew the way to the council chamber, and made straight for it, my head ringing, a buzzing in my ears and the floor seemingly ready to rise and strike me at any moment.

And then at last I was on the floor where the grand dukes met, and pushing my way through the waiting throng of attendants, soldiers and guards.

Some seemingly tried to stop me, and I remember I flung

them to one side and went on. The luck of a madman or a drunkard—I had nearly drained my flask before I left the inn—was with me, for I made on through the crowd, and at last came to the door of the council room itself.

As I paused there, brought to a stand by the throng about the door, I gazed about me vaguely, and for the first time realised every one was buzzing with excitement over some news that was being passed from one to another.

Then I heard some one say:

"She has made her plea, but it will be useless. He holds them in his hands."

The words beat upon my brain, and I pushed madly on.

At the door two sentinels stood, and I tried to push by and enter, but they barred the way.

"Count von Merlder!" I demanded. "Has he gone in?"

"He has, sir."

"Count Heinrich of Vankle?"

"He has not come as yet. Many are asking for him."

"Not come!" I cried, feeling a trick was necessary, and my brain, dull and aching as it was, responding in some way. "Then Zergald will lose. Now I may be too late."

People crowded around us, attracted by my words.

"In the name of the Duke of Zergald," I said, "stand aside. I've a message from Count Heinrich of Vankle."

The soldiers seemed in doubt, but waiting for no leave, as they gave back a step, looking from one to the other to see what they should do, I pushed by them.

The doors swung open into a deep alcove, and heavy

portières hung at the farther side, so that once passing the guards, I was able to pause for an instant.

I felt weak and dizzy, and now, when so near my goal, it seemed as if I could not move on. I grasped the portière drawn close together, and steadied myself, all the time trying to still the ringing in my ears to learn what was going on beyond, and whether I was yet in time.

Voices came to me from the council chamber, and yet I could not seemingly make out the words. I looked about me, as if to find help, and then as I turned back again, found the portières opened a fraction of an inch by my weight upon them.

There sat Kurlmurt; behind him Karl, and beyond, Hilma. She was pale, but she sat straight in her chair, cold and rigid.

About the table were thirty men or over, while Zergald stood at the end and was speaking. At Zergald's right sat a young fellow, whom I took to be Joachim, though at that instant my mind could hardly grasp any facts or my eyes overclearly make out even those I knew well.

I stood clinging to the curtains, staring at the blurred faces before me as if I had no real interest in what was going on, but only watched as one curious to an extreme. Then I began to realise that Zergald was on his feet and speaking.

"And this wild claim!" Zergald said, sarcasm and scorn in his tone—"this wild claim, what is it? A myth; a fancy born in a young girl's mind by a scheming uncle? Is it that? Let us be charitable and answer no; for on such a man as the Duke of Kurlmurt I would never place a slur. Yet, gentlemen, what *is* this claim? I would

pass it by without a word but the birth of his Highness, Joachim the First, King of Scarvania, is questioned—his Highness, the King of Scarvania, I say!" And his cold steel eyes travelled around the grand dukes, meeting each one threateningly, demandingly, defiantly. "His Highness, the King of Scarvania's birth is questioned. Will you have this slur placed upon it? Will you let such a slander pass beyond this room?

"Here it must be stamped upon, exterminated, cast out, as such a vile assertion should be treated. And how? Will you, the peers of the realm, sit there and calmly hear his Highness's fair name defiled? Rise as one body and answer this vile accusation with your vote! A formal matter these meetings heretofore, but to-day pregnant with great responsibility, for it is for you, the grand dukes of fair Scarvania, to answer such a lie by the power vested in your sacred hands.

"Cast one vote; on your feet as a single man, and cry out by acclamation for his royal Highness, Joachim the First, as your King, or—" and his voice sank almost to a whisper—"demand proof! proof!! proof!!! And that her Highness tells you she has not."

As a body the dukes were upon their feet, carried away by Zergald's appeal, and a mighty shout went up from each of them.

Kurlmurt cried out, but his voice was drowned in the rabble. Karl was on his feet; Hilma alone seemed calm.

And then my wild brain seemed to spring to life, and I realised I had delayed too long. With a quick movement I threw open the curtain, and without a word made for her Highness's chair.

The smile on Zergald's lips froze instantly. Kurlmurt and Karl sprang forward, while the grand dukes wheeled upon me, but I—I only saw a pair of beseeching eyes in a pale face, crowned with golden-brown hair.

"The proof the Grand Duke of Zergald asks for, your Highness," I said, dropping to one knee, and holding out the envelope—"the proof I bring to the future Queen of Scarvania."

CHAPTER XXXIV

CORONATION

The lake of Wertzer sparkled clear, a faint breeze playing across its matchless waters, and the perfect blue was broken in a million rippling waves.

Far across, the towers of Zergald's castle were framed dark against the trees. My hand gripped the rail to steady myself—for even now my head was a bit dizzy—while I studied its towers and turrets.

From the one on the right she and I had watched the sun rise. From there we had hoisted her flag of distress. From there had we seen Kurlmurt and Karl ride to our rescue and the assault on the gates.

Had so much come to pass in so short a time? The lake was the same; the garden of the inn traced with many paths, lined deep in shrubbery, and yet everything seemed changed. Perhaps, I said to myself, the change I feel is the change all feel—the change in feeling because she is to be crowned. Already the city had taken on new gaiety. First a rumour had gone forth, then a word, then confirmation and then peal upon peal the bells rang forth. Down came Joachim's picture, up went the Princess Hilma's, and the people the city over shouted and cried for joy.

Why they were to have her for queen made no difference. That the grand dukes had selected their princess

was sufficient. The rumour that had crept here and there the last few days was, after all, of some substance, for now it bore fruit.

People were half mad. Some had been gay because the choosing of a ruler was a time for gaiety, but now they went still farther, as that ruler was their heart's choice.

Others who had had no heart to shout for Joachim, shouted now twice as loud, for the reason that they shouted out of joy at the turn events had taken, so unlooked for a few hours ago.

And this change in feeling, perhaps, had got into my blood and made me feel so different. Or was it because my task was done? No need this morning to steady my hand to see if I could shoot straight, for no need would come. No need to think, plot or plan.

The travelling of secret passages was at an end. Heinrich was gone, good horses taking him across the frontier before Karl could catch up with him, so, now, no chance to cross blades with him. Zergald's nails were cut and he himself in all but name a prisoner.

No need to plan to circumvent his schemes, for scheme he could not. No need to worry over papers, now back safe in Kurlmurt's strong box. No need to think of anything, unless——

My hands gripped the railing again, and far up the shore my eyes sought the white quay, then that spot where the grounds about her palace reached the waters.

And while I looked and thought of what I should not, Karl stepped out upon the balcony.

I did not turn even when he laid his hand gently on my shoulder.

For a moment he looked where I looked, and perhaps felt one bit what I felt.

"Well done, John Converse, well done!" he said.

"I'm not done yet," I answered suddenly, a madness seeming to grip me and set my mind in a whirl.

"No, it's not actually done, it's true," he answered, mistaking my meaning; "but in an hour she will be crowned."

"Will she?" I cried, turning and looking at him for the first time. "Will she, think you? How do you know? If I lift my finger you'll have no one to crown this day."

He looked at me steadily for a moment, and then his hand fell on my shoulder again.

I dropped into a chair on the other side of the table and buried my face in my hands.

"I mean it to be well done," I murmured.

"And no one else could have done it as you have."

"What does Kurlmurt say?" I asked, raising my head.

"Nothing. And yet even now she has told him she would not be crowned."

"But he persuaded her?" I demanded almost angrily.

"Yes, he prevailed upon her."

"Tell the waiter to send my luggage to the station. I'll take the evening train."

"There's no need to run away," Karl said. "There's no hint of the part you took. Kurlmurt saw the grand dukes and told them you had found the envelope by chance; he explained it easily. Of course, the fact that Zergald held her captive will leak out in time, but now no one knows the truth, and so——"

But Karl stopped, seeing the look on my face.

"I'll arrange for you to go," he said, "if you think you're strong enough to travel."

"I'm strong enough to travel," I answered.

The sudden change in plans made much to be done, and while the people rejoiced, there was a great hurrying here and there to prepare the princess for the ceremony. Some talk had been of a postponement, but Hilma refused to listen to such a plan, saying, if she must be crowned at all it would be at once.

Karl left me, after arranging for my leaving, but returned within the hour, as I was to go with him to the cathedral.

In that hour that I waited alone my thoughts were a strange jumbling. As questions had arisen I had met them, and if when all was past and done I felt I could have acted differently, or at the crossing paths turned to one side when at the time I took the other, I see no need to set it down here.

Sufficient to say, I went back slowly over all that had occurred. I had dined alone with her on the little balcony. It had been the meeting place for many conferences, and over the table I had talked with Karl and Kurlmurt and Heinrich.

In the garden below we had fought our brief, sharp fight; and there on the lake I had seen her for the second time and crossed but three nights before to her help.

I had much to occupy my mind that hour, and it seemed very soon when Karl came again.

I mounted the horse he had brought me, and we rode back, side by side, to the cathedral.

All about us the crowd pressed close; overhead, flags

flew. Her picture covered the walls and bunting hung from every house front.

It was a great holiday crowd, gay and happy. To them there was no undercurrent. The princess was to be their queen; a place, to them, she could only welcome. That was enough for every man and woman in Zakbar, except perhaps three. Karl and Kurlmurt could but rejoice, though I am sure their happiness was clouded a bit by the knowledge of the truth.

We rode to the side entrance of the cathedral, and then as in a dream I saw transpire what all those days I had striven to make possible.

She took the oath. The cardinal placed the crown upon her fair golden-brown hair, and she turned facing us. The organ peeled forth, and yet I seemed to hear no sound, unless it was a long-drawn cry of pain.

Before me on the high steps stood a tall fair woman. She was pale standing there, so straight, a look of determination on her face, but to me no real gladness in her eyes.

And then Karl touched me on the arm and beckoned me to follow him.

I did so, moving as if in a dream, my eyes on her face, for I thought it was my last sight.

"Wait here," Karl said.

I looked up then, and found I was in a small room, Karl having as he spoke left me.

Then Kurlmurt came, but only for an instant.

Our hands clasped and he pressed my fingers in an iron grasp.

"It's no time to speak of gratitude when things have had to be done that seem to say we have none."

"We all of us were as one to do a thing, and it's done," I answered.

"Aye, it's done," he said, looking away from me for an instant, "it's done, and one-half of me shouts with the mob, but the other half, John Converse, has no hurrah to utter. I love her as my own child, and I'm not so old or gruff a soldier not to know that the heart's the guide. Yet at times in matters of state the heart—what the heart feels——"

"Is a treasure to be cherished," I finished for him.

"God give you strength to see it so," he said, and with another grip of the hand he was gone.

And then as I waited some minutes, wondering where Karl could be, the door opened again and he stood beckoning me to follow.

"Come!" he said, and we passed on down the hall to another door.

"Wait here. I will be back for you in time to ride to the station."

The room was dark, heavy curtains being drawn at the windows. A large oak table was in the middle of the floor, and I moved toward the chair at its side.

Then as my eyes grew accustomed to the half light the curtains at the windows were thrown back and Hilma stood before me.

For an instant we faced each other without a word, and then she moved forward slowly.

"They tell me you are going at once," she said in a voice little more than a whisper.

I bowed my head, unable to speak. My heart beat fast; a great longing swelled within me and I felt as if nothing could keep me from her. And then my weakness vanished before hers.

She had done the thing they asked, had gone on strong in her determination to do what was demanded of her, but now that it was done she threw courage to the winds and asked for what her heart demanded.

"John!" she cried.

I led her gently to a chair.

"Hilma," I said, speaking slowly, with the realisation that I must be brave as against her weakness, "at the last let us keep our courage if we cannot our hearts."

"But what is it all?" she cried. "I am their queen, but no crown was ever more cruel, no task ever harder. I want——"

"Hush!" I interrupted. "Neither of us is over strong. What our hearts say is a sealed book that we cannot speak of aloud."

"But it will be heard. I cannot let you go. I want you and only you. If you leave me now——"

"I shall only go where I can be recalled if you need me."

"I need you now! now! now!"

"If you ever need me as you have the last few weeks," I answered.

"But will you come a month hence; a year?"

Her hands were grasping mine, and then at the question my love swelled to its full, and in an instant she, Queen of Scarvania though she was, was in my arms.

"You will not leave me?" she cried, clinging to me, her hand softly caressing my forehead.

And then I realised what I had done, yet felt no shame.

"My queen," I answered, stepping back and looking down upon her, "I cannot stay."

"No! no!" she cried. "I shall abdicate. Kurlmurt can rule as well as I——"

But I shook my head.

"Oh!" she cried, "even you are against me."

"I am for you, my queen, and forever, and being so must do what I would not."

"I shall abdicate. Ah, do not look so. I shall, if not to-day, a month or a year hence, and then I shall come to you if you will not to me."

"Then," I said, "I shall come to you."

"Then you will come to me?"

"Then I will come to you."

"I shall send for you." Her eyes held mine.

"I shall come and now I swear forever allegiance to my queen," and I dropped to my knees, pressing her hands to my lips.

She took my face between her hands, as she had that day which seemed so long ago, and looked earnestly into my eyes; then leaning down slowly, her lips touched mine.

"No other lips, no other love but yours."

"No other lips, no other love," I answered her.

For a full minute I knelt so, looking into her face, studying each line, tracing each feature—a memory to carry with me.

And as I knelt the bells above us rang forth, one long peal.

The joy in her face died down.

Again the bells pealed forth and then a knock came at the door.

"It's I, your Majesty," Karl said.

"In a moment, Karl! in a moment!" she cried. "They will demand enough; one moment more now."

"The people are waiting, the bells are being rung," he answered.

"Go!" I whispered. "You must some time."

But she clung to me and her arms were about my neck.

She said—ah what! Again Karl knocked, after waiting. Again she begged him to go away, but at last I called for him to enter, though she cried out that he should not.

And so at last she passed from the room. Slow steps; her eyes looking back—a pause at the door—a last look and she was gone.

Karl came, and, like one in a dream, I followed him.

We mounted at the door and pressed our way through the great throng about the cathedral. The square was one mass of people, and through it we made our way slowly.

As we neared the farther side the great bells rang forth, peal upon peal, and then from every part of the city answering bells gave forth answering peal.

At the water front the cannons roared a salute, and then a mighty shout went up from the crowd.

I pulled up my horse and turned. On the top of the great steps, between the huge pillars, a tall girl stood. On her head of fair golden-brown hair rested a crown. She raised her hand slowly, and the crowd set up a wild cry.

"Long live her Majesty! Long live her Majesty! Long live Queen Hilma!"

The cannons boomed, the bells rang on and on, and then I turned and followed Karl, the only one of all that multitude without a cry of joy upon his lips.

And now eighteen months have gone by. I have still deserted America, hovering here on the Continent or in England. Twice I have seen Karl.

All is well. Heinrich still gone, though under Kurlmurt's eye; Zergald away, living a lonely man, yet a subject to the queen he would not have had, for she in her goodness forgave him and only stripped him of his power.

And Hilma? I have three letters. All that they should be from a queen to an American, one of a race her father liked full well.

Yet at the last there is a cry somewhere in the words or else between the lines, and it is only because it's best for her and best for me that I hold back from another hurried trip—London to Paris—then on—on—over wild country to that little sunny lake, cast in a setting rich and grand, where lives one who—some day—but then, who can tell—who is to-day my queen.

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